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No. 342

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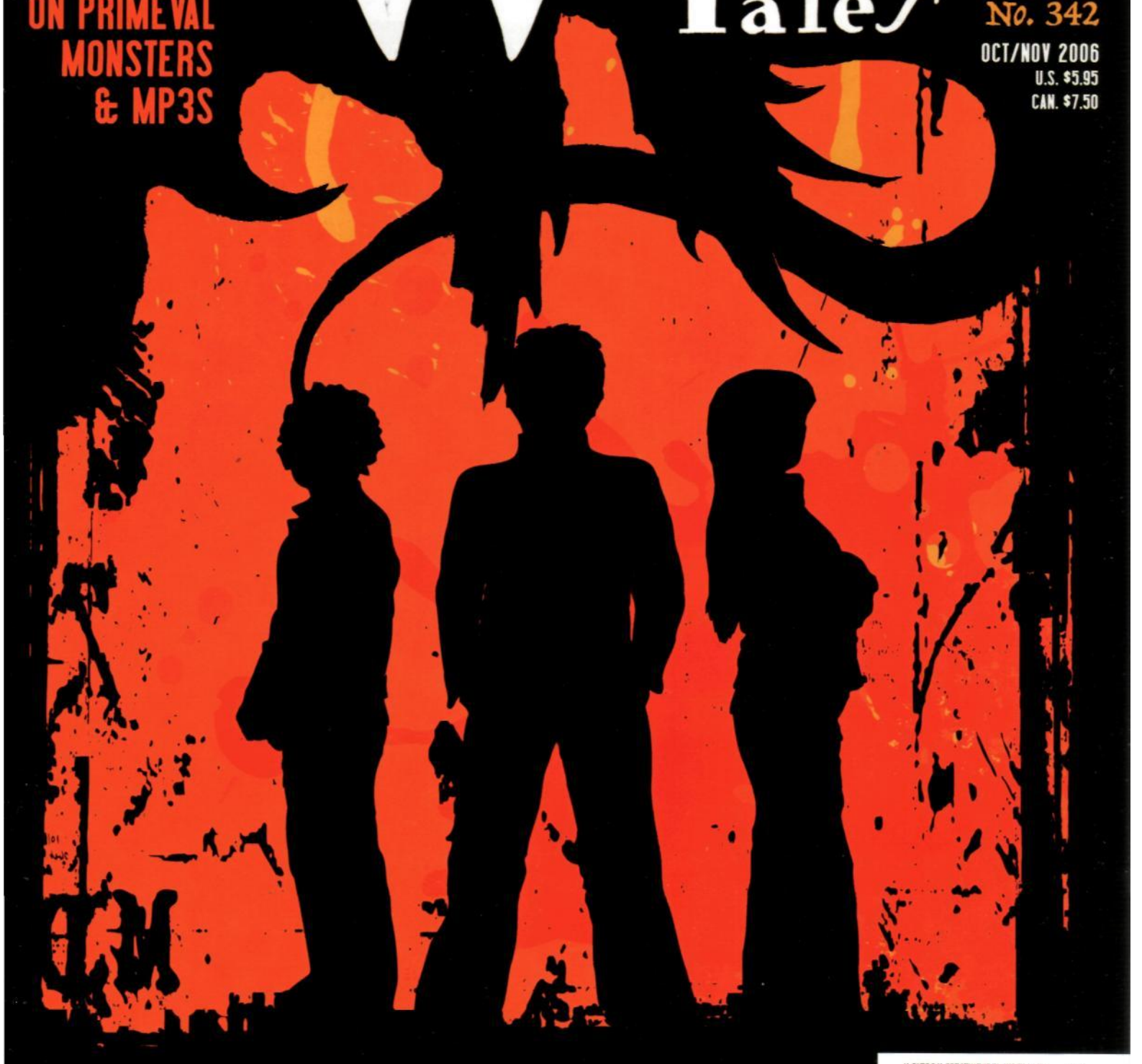

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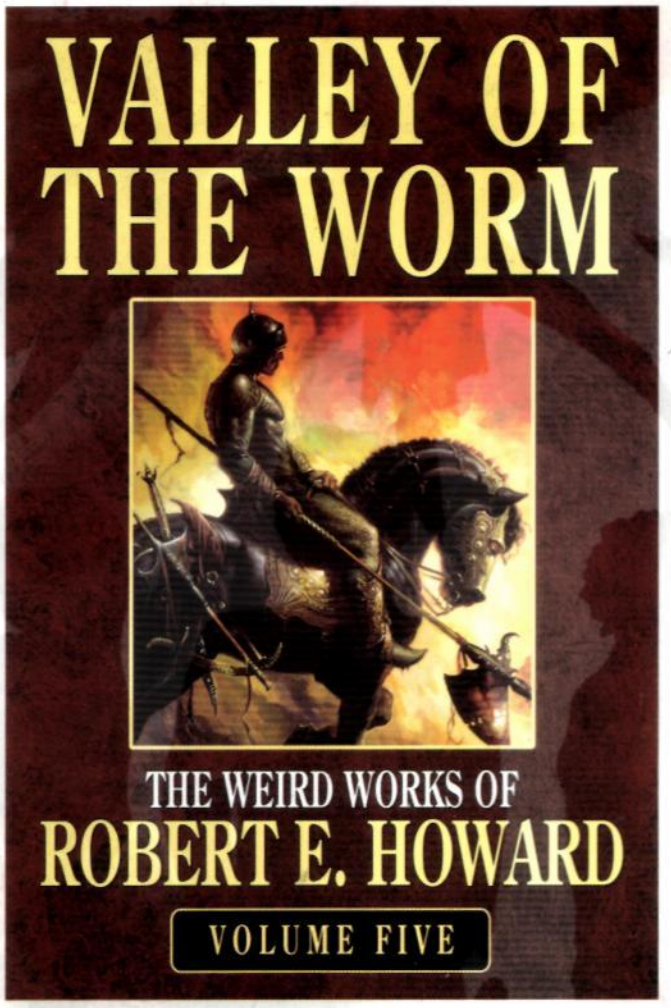

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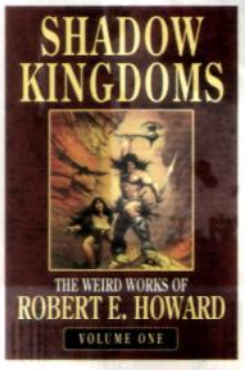

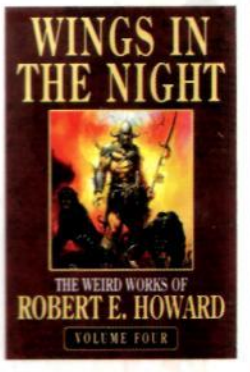

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The Unique Magazine

cover art by Kirsty Pargeter

Issue 342 ~ Vol. 61, No. 6

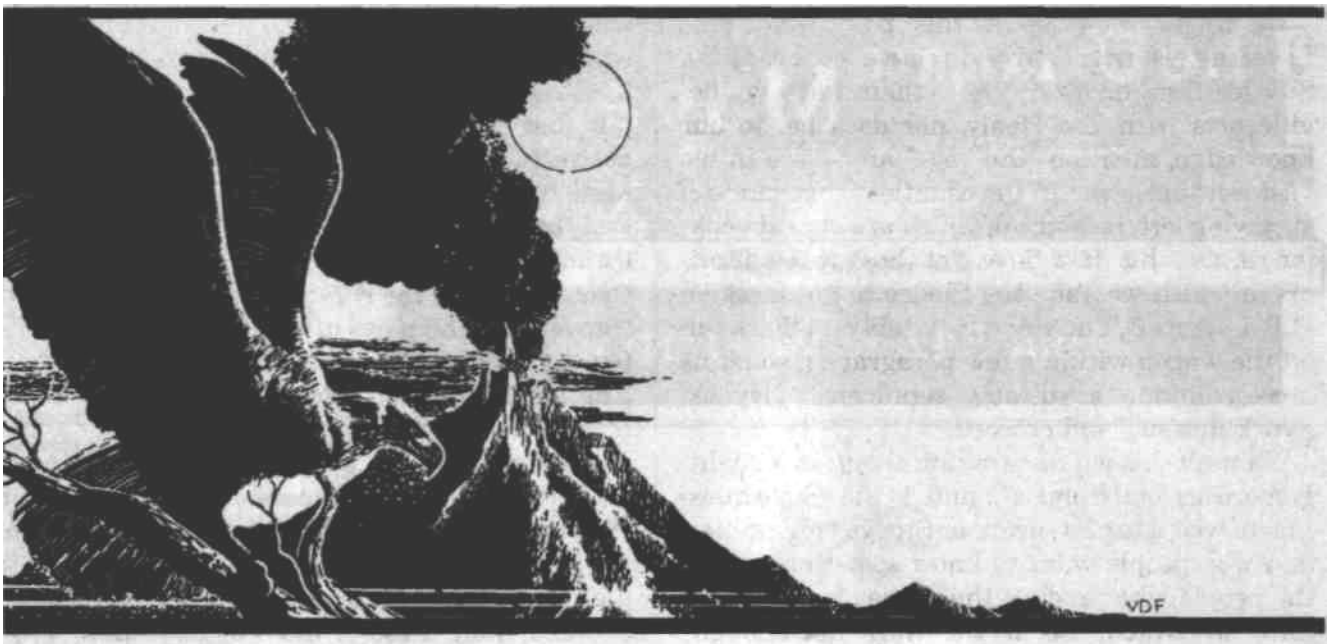
A Note from the Publisher

Longtime readers of The Unique Magazine may be in for a shock in coming months, as WEIRD TALES gets its first major visual overhaul in almost 75 years. We will be phasing in a new logo and completely revamping the interior layout, bringing this magazine — which was founded, after all, on its desire and ability to startle readers — fully into the 21st century. We hope to attract legions of new fans with a more modern appearance — which first makes its debut on our recently relaunched Web site, **www.weirdtalesmagazine.com**. We trust you will be delighted.

Fans of the old look, please note that we will *also* continue to print our "pulp magazine edition" of WEIRD TALES proudly emblazoned with the classic logo. Take your pick!

— John Betancourt
Publisher, Wildside Press

It's coming . . . >> weird tales



THE EYRIE

Of Dream Research, Nyucks, Knuckleheads, the Intentional Fallacy, Biographical Criticism & Even More Nyucks

Very much in the spirit of the writer who argued that the great thing about writing is that *anything* you do, unless you are snoring loudly, need never be called goofing off, but can always be "research" — and going further to insist that said writer overlooked the whole area of dream research, which is *very* scientific — we will shamelessly admit that we spent an afternoon in which we could have been writing this editorial visiting the world's greatest collection of Three Stooges memorabilia, the Stoogeum. It's quite an amazing place, a three-storey, really professional-quality museum located north of Philadelphia. This Edifice of Culture — undeniably more interesting than, say, the Cockroach Hall of Fame — would surely make it into *Roadside America* in an eyeblink (or perhaps we should say eyepoke) if it were open to the public more often, but it is a private institution owned by Mr. Gary Lassin of the Three Stooges Fanclub, and it is only open a few days a year, usually in connection with Stooge film events in the Philadelphia area. Philly is a very Stooge town, you know. Two of the six men who played in the Act were born there, Larry Fine and Curly-Joe DeRita, and certainly every tourist should view, not only such conventional high-points as the Philadelphia Art Museum and Independence Hall, but the gigantic Larry Fine mural on South Street.

What, you may reasonably ask, has this amazing building full of Stooge posters, toys, original props and sound-effects devices, comic books, not to mention life-sized wax figures of Moe, Larry, and Curly (which help you appreciate that these guys were short, about 5 feet 4), and even a Stooge slot machine (with appropriate sound effects); where you can either sit and watch Stooge films in a luxurious theatre or view the collection *and* watch Stooge films because there is a large TV monitor in every room; have to do with *Weird Tales?* Can we possibly demonstrate that this digression is even remotely germane to our ostensible topics of horrific and fantastic literature, our pulp heritage, or *anything* we are supposed to be writing about?

Well, soitenly.

We might mention at this point that H.P. Lovecraft is not known to have ever seen a Stooges film, or even one of their early vaudeville acts with Ted Healy, nor does he, to our knowledge, mention "the boys" anywhere in his vast writings, even in the countless thousands of surviving letters (some of which are almost book-length), so this *could* be one of those rare editorials in which we Take the Pledge to not mention H.P. Lovecraft, but we're inevitably going to fall off the wagon within a few paragraphs, so let us merely intone a suitably sepulchral, "Nyuck, nyuck fhtagn," and proceed.

What all this got us thinking about, in a slightly more serious frame of mind, is the whole question of writer, artist, actor, or Stooge biographies, and why people want to know something about the people who produce the stories we read, the films we watch, etc. Is the Work not enough? Does it stand on its own?

Obviously not. The tendency has been apparent since ancient times, when more than one city in Asia used to offer tourist a glimpse of the alleged birthplace of Homer; and there was, even then, much speculation on who the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* really was. Suetonius, the author of the famous *The Twelve Caesars* also wrote a book of *Lives of Grammarians and Rhetoricians,* which covers Terence, Horace, Virgil, Persius, Lucan, and a (very fragmentary) description of Pliny the Elder (dubbed a rhetorician), and which is, basically, literary biography.

Certainly if, in those days, someone could have displayed the very reed with which Homer wrote (it being a whole other subject whether Homer wrote at all, or had ever even *heard* of writing, but we truly digress; sorry about that) or his lyre, they would certainly have drawn a crowd of paying customers.

We might also mention that Philadelphia is not only a haven of Stooginess, but it also has an Edgar Allan Poe house, which Lovecraft *did* write about in his "Homes and Shrines of Poe." (There we go. You just *knew* it would happen . . . Cthulhu makes us do these things. Our brains have been taken over. We can't help it.) There is not a whole lot *in* the Poe house, but it is a place where he did actually live, and one of several where he allegedly wrote *The Raven* — shades of the multiple birthplaces of Homer.

It just seems to be a natural and universal desire to want to get close to and summon up some sense of the presence of writers, artists, and other performers after they are dead, through places and artifacts associated with them. Probably the reason so many cranks try to "prove" that the plays of Shakespeare were written by the entire population of Elizabethan England *except* a certain gentleman from Stratford — other than the fact that he's the biggest target and nobody would get famous proving that Francis Bacon or the Queen or Sir Walter Raleigh or Attila the Hun wrote the works of Thomas Dekker, or even Beaumont & Fletcher — is that *his* biography, though more detailed than those of most of his fellow play wrights, is still much too sketchy for us to have any sense of the man himself. Was he an extrovert or introvert, bawdy or chaste, secretly a Catholic or an utter flag-waving arch-Protestant? If you read enough Shakespeare biographies, you will discover that he evolves over time, and each version is the product of the era that produced it; the biographical Shakespeare is essentially a creation of later imagination.

And that will never do. We want to know the artist, not just experience the art. For weird-fiction aficionados, not to mention *Weird Tales* readers — and if that sounds like the famous lines, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" "Who came in?" we can only plead that it may take a while for us to recover from that Stoogeum visit — we have the perhaps fortune coincidence that through H.P. Lovecraft's 10,000 or so letters (many of them *very* long) and the memoirs and other first-hand material about him, which range (as you can see from Peter Cannon's Arkham House volume, *Lovecraft Remembered)* from 1915 to 1997, Lovecraft is perhaps the most thoroughly documented literary person of all time. Verily, if there was a three-day stretch in his life in which we don't know where he was, who he was with, what they talked about, and what flavor the ice cream was, that is the "lost period."

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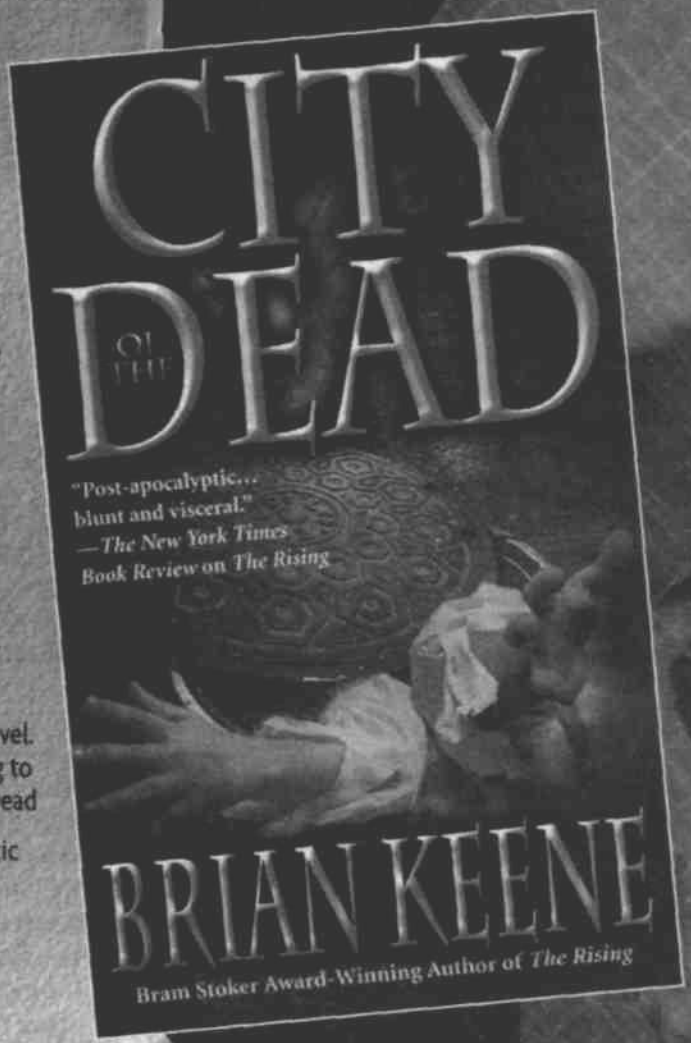
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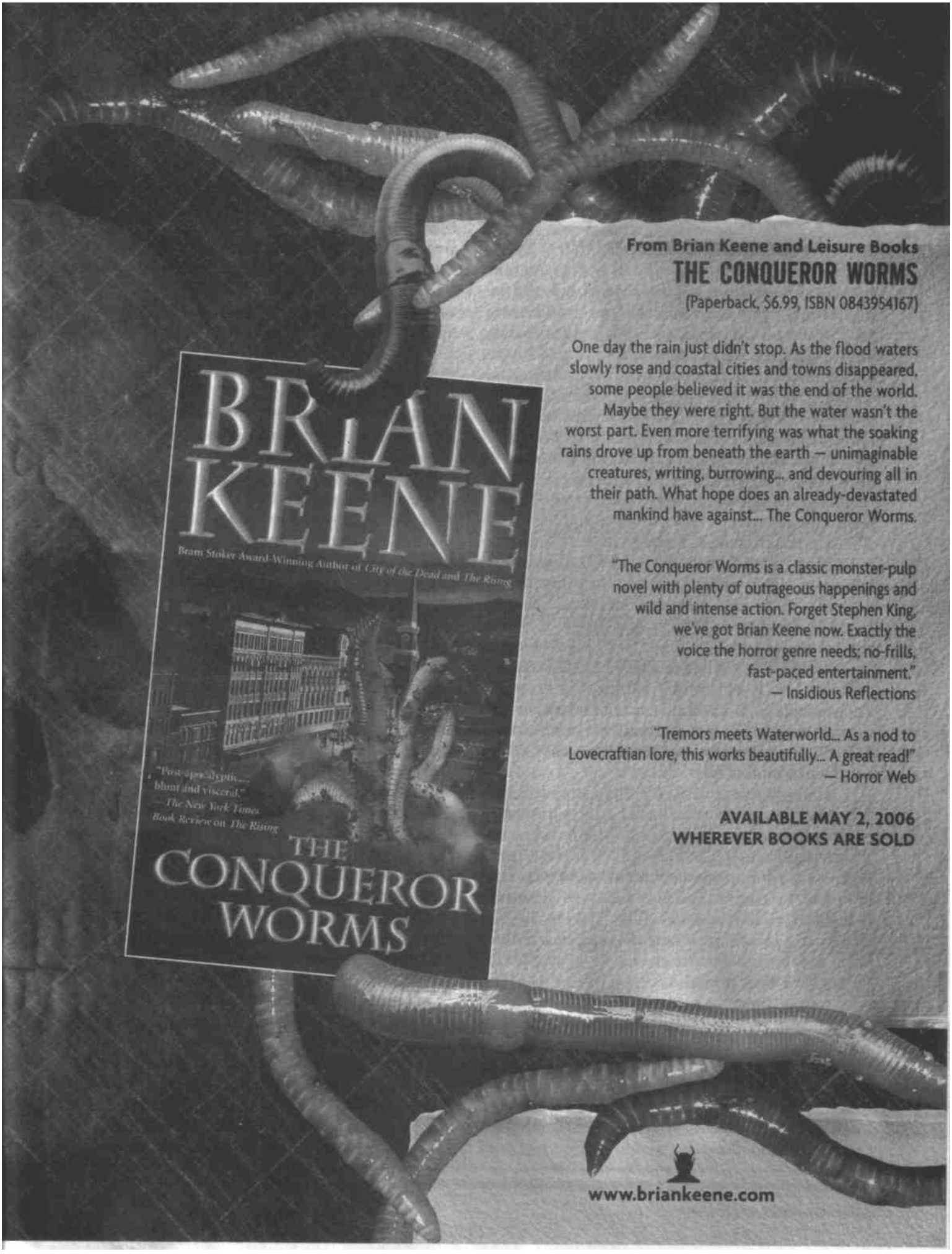
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As our colleague Jason Van Hollander has pointed out, for a lot of people in our field, Lovecraft is talismanic. It is remarkably easy to outlive Robert E. Howard, for instance. We don't want to make light of a great writer or the tragedy of his life, but all you have to do is not shoot yourself at the age of thirty. Yet, when you reach your forty-seventh birthday, you notice: You have outlived H.P. Lovecraft.

Struggling writers and artists out there take encouragement from Lovecraft's struggle, knowing, as Lovecraft did not know and would never have believed, that by maintaining the integrity and originality of his work to the point of counter-commercial obsessiveness, by refusing to become a conventional pulp writer of like so many of his colleagues, Lovecraft has left virtually all the pulp writers of his day (not to mention most of the literary writers) in his dust. That's why he's in Library of America before E. Hoffmann Price — or for that matter, Ernest Hemingway.

The more obsessed among us may even be preparing for their own fame, carefully preserving every draft, letter, and laundry-list for the benefit of future literary scholars. Daniel Pearlman wrote an extremely funny story on this tendency, entitled "The Best-Known Man in the World." It's not specifically in a Lovecrafty context, but it splendidly captures the vanity and absurdity of banking on your own posthumous success. (We recommend Pearlman's book, *The Best-Known Man in the World and Other Misfits*, Aardwolf Press, 2001.)

It is inescapable, though, that our reading of an author's work is influenced and to some sense *completed* by some notion of who the author was. We don't just *read* "The Raven." We have a sense of Poe sitting in that dark room under the bust of Pallas, writing it. The personality of Lovecraft is behind all his works. "The Horror at Red Hook" is a story, but when we read it were are informed by the fact that this is a product of HPL's New York period.

Of course there is a whole school of academic criticism which rejects all this, which says texts are just texts, and that nobody wrote them, really; they somehow exist in space between the page and the reader and the printed page and that every "story" is a collaboration, continuously created, and if anybody brings up the naive, oldfashioned idea that the actual writer had any idea of what he was doing or what the story meant, this must be dismissed as the "intentional fallacy."

To which we say, "Phooey," and, "Go soak your head in a bucket while reading the collected works of Jacques Lacan and gurgling 'woo-boo-woo-boo!' underwater." Fortunately such notions have had remarkably little impact on either the writing or reading of literature, because the Deconstructionists, Post-Structuralists, and that lot tend to write in a thick jargon which rapidly turns into gibberish; and on the rare occasion that one of them achieves momentary lucidity, the ideas seem just plain *silly,* worthy of a poke in the eye.

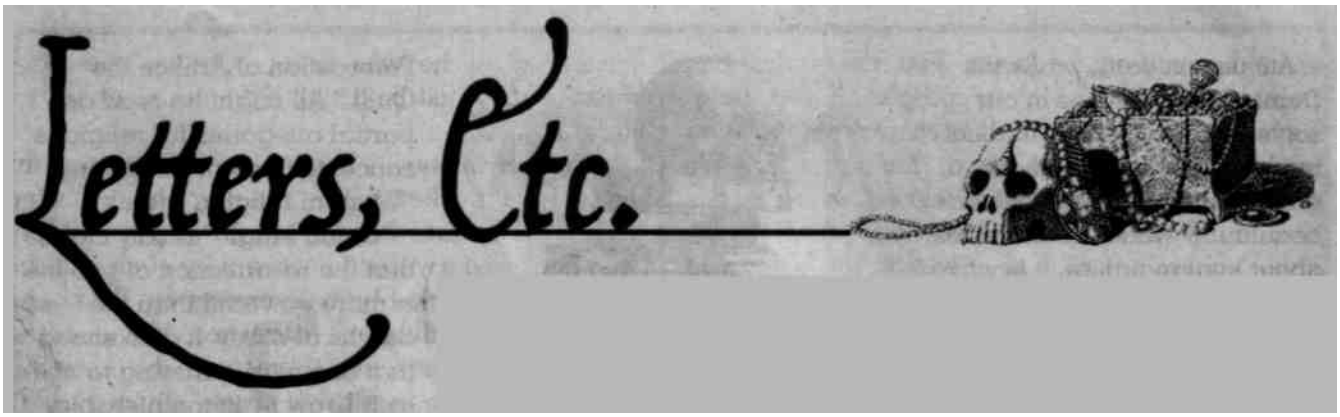
This is not to deny that a story by a writer about whom nothing is known has meaning, and that this is a somewhat different meaning from a story by someone as fantastically over-documented as Lovecraft. A text by Mark Twain is one thing; Mark Twain on the stage delivering that text must have been quite another, not merely from the manner of his delivery or even his stage personality, but from the awareness on the part of his contemporaries that they shared the planet with this particular man and that he mattered.

It may well be that a living author, in effect, collaborates with his own text; and a dead author's memory collaborates with it *differently;* and this is filtered through culture ... so, yes, the meaning of a text does change over time. But, we argue, it changes precisely because we try to reach out to the author himself. That is one reason why, in a small way, we have begun to contribute to this process by including author blurbs at the ends of the stories in *Weird Tales.* People have asked for them. These blurbs aren't just an excuse to plug the writer's latest book, but to establish a link, and give a sense that, hey, there is *someone* behind this byline.

(See, we weren't goofing off this afternoon. It was all research. Nyuck-nyuck.)

THE MOST POPULAR STORY . . .

... in issue 340 got enough votes (thank you!) that we can actually determine the results by our usual scientific means: 1st place, "A Taste Sweet and Salty" by Douglas Smith. 2nd place (tie), "Arthur's Lion" by Tanith Lee and "The Persecution of Artifice the Quill" by John R. Fultz. 3rd place, "Small Magic" by Jay Lake.



JOHN R. FULTZ responds to issue #340's editorial about E.R. Eddison:

I enjoyed your thoughtful examination of *The Worm. Ouroboros* in WT #340. The novel is a true classic of lyrical fantasy. If I may, I'd like to propose an answer to your question about why Eddison chose to end the novel as he did. My proposal: He was offering an allegory about the mysterious, cyclical forces that drive mankind to war again and again throughout the course of history.

Looking at a few details can provide support for this thesis: Firstly, these are not humans that Eddison writes about, even though they have very human qualities. Eddison purposefully refers to them as "Demons" (which mean evil spirits), and "Witches" (traditionally meaning worshipers of evil — although modem witches are known as Earth worshipers, the connotations here are in the classic sense), "Goblins" (wicked nonhu-man creatures), eta The novel's main conflict wages between the inhabitants of Demonland and Witchland. These aren't aliens, or tribes of primeval humans, they are supernatural forces who inhabit a mythic dimension which probably lies somewhere between the collective heart and mind of the entire human race; a land of purest myth.

Secondly, the book chronicles much war and battle, and toward the end the characters have finally achieved peace — but it is a peace in which they cannot be happy (as you pointed out in your analysis). Although the war with Witchland is over, the heroes of Demonland crave the bloody exertions of war, the action and the danger, the clash of sword on shield, the thrill of vanquishing foes on the field of battle. Again, these are not truly human qualities — they are the qualities of Spirits of War — longings which one might even call "evil" when taken to extremes. (Although humans sometimes become obsessed with the illusion of these longings — fascinated with the "glory" of war and such — usually this happens to those who have never actually been exposed to the miserable, bloody terror of actual war.)

Thirdly, the book ends just as it begins: A peaceful royal court in Demonland is interrupted by an ambassador from Witchland, and all the knights reach anxiously for their swords. This implies that the cycle of war is to begin again — and the heroes of Demonland are happy for it. Thus, the novel follows the pattern of its own titular motif, the great serpent biting its own tale — the symbol of eternity — in this case, the eternal struggle of war, a "monster" that has dogged mankind through the violence of millennia.

What is it that drives Man to constantly make war on his brother? What metaphysical forces or evil shades inhabit the nether regions of the human consciousness, driving us to slaughter each other in great blood-orgies of organized chaos? Why can't we have a lasting peace on this meager earth of ours?

Eddison's great allegory suggests that these "spirits" are the forces that writhe within the brains and souls of Man (like serpents), causing humans to engage in the endless cycle of violence and warfare. While real humans may tire of bloodshed, death, and constant danger, these living metaphysical manifestations of warlike fury never do. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Things are in the saddle, And ride mankind." I think Eddison would agree, and the "Things" in this case are the Demons and Witches of a mythical universe where war is the most savored treat.

These spectres of fancy, these incarnations of bloodlust, these god-like warmongers are simply allegories for Man's unending obsession with war itself. Like a serpent devouring its own tail, the cycle of death and violence continues on earth, while the Demons and Witches in our souls exult in our pain and suffering. This, I believe, is the grand statement that Eddison's beautifully-written novel makes about human nature. It is why he had to end his novel in such a manner... with the cycle of war beginning yet again.

Until we as a united race can slice this "Worm" in half like Alexander cut the Gordian Knot, (which will mean a fundamental change in the collective human consciousness), we will continue to suffer the perpetual cycle of war. For example, look at what's happening in the Middle East right now. The Worm is turning yet again and, in some mythical realm, the Demons and Witches are sharpening their blades and salivating over this latest outbreak of red war as if it were a steak laid bloody and steaming on their opulent table.

Eddison's ending makes sense as a perfect allegory for Man's ancient dilemma: his own propensity for war. It is the great serpent that threatens to devour us all, unless we learn how to defeat it once and for all.

WEIRD TALES responds:

The conventional view has always been that Eddison was indulging in a bit of uncontrolled and perhaps ill-advised whimsy when he called his Mercurians "Witches" and "Demons," but yours is certainly an arresting interpretation. Besides, what else could he have called them? Made-up names like "Glonchians" and "Snorchians" would seem a bit lame, as would naming them after geographical regions or features, e.g. "Mountain People." Certainly Eddison's eccentric vision is of a piece, as it is, Witches, Demons, and all.

GABE DYBING writes:

The Eyrie, as always, is interesting and informative. You provide a very apt discussion of how Eddison's themes contrast with Tolkien's. It seems that Eddison brought to his fantasy novels a sentiment borrowed (and perhaps, as he might have believed, shared) wholesale from the Sagas. The Demons and Witches might be seen as living in some land of Norse afterlife, where Odin's heroes get to eat and drink and then kill one another without consequence: the Demons simply turn back time (or however they accomplish it — it's been a while since I've read the book), and the Witches once again are there to kill. It's heaven indeed. I would add that the case of Eddison's enthusiasm for the "Viking code" is strengthened by the observance that he wrote a Viking novel that (I read somewhere) C.S. Lewis considered one of the best Viking novels ever written, *Styrbjorn the Strong.* In my day, I consider Poul Anderson's War *of the Gods* the best Viking novel ever written.

This issue of *Weird Tales* might be seen as a special "theology issue," specifically because of three of the best tales, "Small Magic," "A Taste Sweet & Salty," and "The Persecution of Artifice the Quill." All might be read as partial allegories for religious concepts (I'm not privileging "Western religion" here).

"Small Magic" boldly claims that the resurrection of one life is more powerful than the deaths of many. It also shows that one man adhering to one small vow is unconquerable. This is a powerful story.

"A Taste Sweet & Salty" shows one man giving over, however unjustly, his life for another, and how this leads to the man's ultimate redemption from the purgative cycle he's been in.

In "The Persecution of Artifice the Quill," "magic" may be read to stand in for "belief in religious structures," and the protagonist learns that, though the use of "magic" may be much abused, it does provide — even for our protagonist — some ultimate value (I hesitate to say it's "true" — too loaded a word). I especially enjoyed this tale because of the giant spider mounts. This is a rich and enchanting story.

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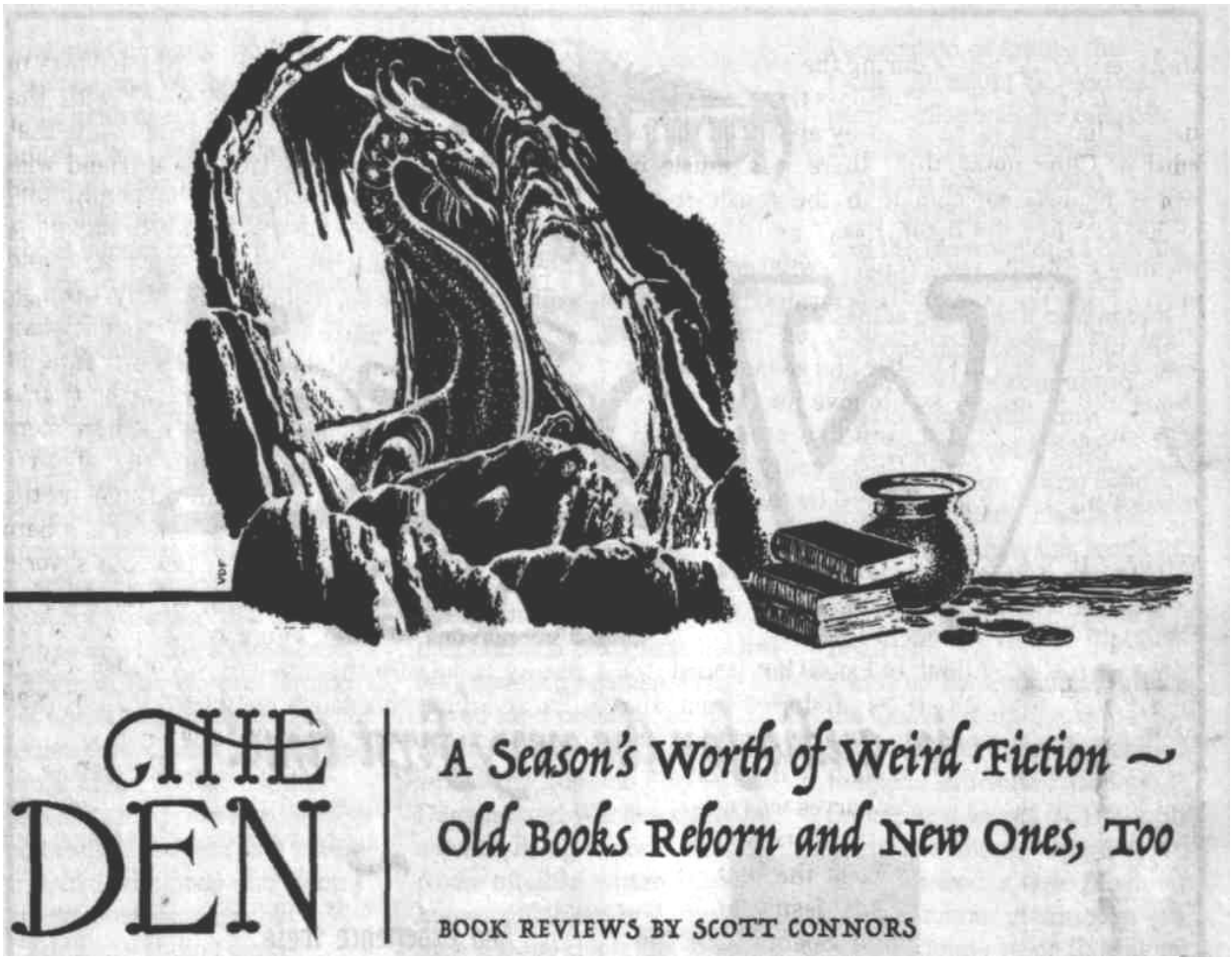

THE DARK CHAMBER by Leonard Cline (Cold Spring Press, $6.99)

Leonard Cline's 1927 novel *The Dark Chamber* is one of the titles described by H.P. Lovecraft in his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" that actually reads better than Lovecraft's description. Cline was a talented and critically acclaimed novelist whose career was tragically cut short as the result of a prison sentence for manslaughter. He is an excellent example of how mainstream writers prior to the 1920s could utilize themes and subject matter that would be thrust into a literary ghetto in a few years with the rise of critics such as Irving Babbitt and Edmund Wilson. Like Jane Eyre, *The Dark Chamber* is partially a delicious parody of Gothic mannerisms and memes: the isolated and lonely Old Dark House, the Byronic villain, the huge menacing dog, "experiments of a semi-scientific nature," etc. Even the names of the characters assault the reader with their blatant symbolism: the dog is named "Tod," which we are reminded means "death" in German, while the seldom-seen Master of the House is one "Richard Pride."

It would be too simple to dismiss this as kitsch were it not for two things. The first is the seminal importance of the story to modern horror fiction. As Douglas A. Anderson points out in his informative introduction, Lovecraft read the book and passed it along to several of his associates, including Donald Wandrei, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, and Henry S. Whitehead. All of these wrote stories dealing with ancestral memory that owe their existence in large part to Cline, but Cline's treatment of the theme, besides being the first, is also the most powerful. Cline used the Gothic trappings as a cultural shorthand that allowed him to communicate ideas that were cutting-edge during the 1920s.

The other redeeming factor is the sheer pleasure of Cline's style. In an essay appended to this edition, Cline noted that "there is a music in words no less sensible than the music in an orchestra after the baton rises," and if Cline is inclined to Sturm und Drang, so what? Language such as "On the bows of trees strained taunt the night fiddled with a giant bow," or "the doomed year dress herself in October and stood for a little thoughtful in loveliness," to give just two examples plucked at random, are like a stage magician, distracting us with their beauty while communicating meaning unnoticed by the audience.

THING OF DARKNESS by G. G. Pendarves DARKER TIDES by Eric Frank Russell (Midnight House, $45 each)

Midnight House has issued two collections of stories from this magazine's early days that are of more than a little interest. G. G. Pendarves was one of the many second-string writers who provided the bulk of stories in an issue after the Lovecrafts, Seabury Quinns, and Edmond Hamiltons finished their contributions; *Thing of Darkness* is the first of two collections gathering her contributions to this magazine. A native of Cornwall, she wrote in a direct, energetic manner that manages to create a spooky atmosphere despite a certain crudity of technique.

Miss Pendarves also had a keen interest in occultism, which lends her work a certain aura of authenticity at the expense of awe. Lovecraft once made the assertion that it was easier for an atheist *or* agnostic writer to concoct a weird tale than it would be for a devoted believer; and regardless of its applicability to the genre as a whole, in this instance HPL was right on the money. Pendarves was on such familiar terms with her material that much of the sense of wonder was diminished. In addition, she wrote of a very human evil driven by a desire for power and a willingness to storm the gates of heaven to gain it, but her own belief in the triumph of good makes many of these villains mere stick figures who collaborate in their own destruction. This is nowhere better illustrated than in "The Grave at Goonhilly." A sensitive young lad who belongs to the local golf club becomes obsessed with the notion that the fifth hole contains something that is trying to possess him. He tells a friend who has a profound knowledge of the occult, and his friend discovers that the fifth-hole mound is the burial spot of a 16th-century alchemist and sadist, who was searching for a body through which he could return to our town. Reminiscent of both H. R. Wakefield's "Seventeenth Hole at Duncaster" and Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,* its pulpish origins are nowhere more apparent than in the climax, where the villain is vanquished despite his full knowledge of the hero's true identity. The fact that there is a hero is itself a shame, since, as HPL wrote several times, the true hero of a weird tale is the phenomenon described. In Pendarves's favor are her ability to capture the nuances of Cornish village life; and if her characters are drawn with a broad brush, at least she uses a full palette.

While Miss Pendarves is largely remembered for her association with this magazine, it is often forgotten that not only was Eric Frank Russell (1905-1978) a mainstay of *Weird Tales* in the late 1940s, but that one of our distinguished competitors, *Unknown Worlds,* was started in 1939 for the purpose of providing a home for his Fortean novel *Sinister Barrier*. Back when I was a teenager, eagerly purchasing back issues from mail-order dealers, I turned to Russell's contributions with a gusto ordinarily reserved for tales by Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, and Fritz Leiber; and as with their tales, I was not often disappointed. Russell's prose displays a rare sense of irony and wit that Clark Ashton Smith undoubtedly appreciated, and does the reader the compliment of presenting the story in an indirect fashion so that he has an investment in the tale. His stories are more science fantasy than horror, since they often deal with the manifestation of a superior science that is mistaken for magic, as in the wonderful tale "The Ponderer," one of the joys of a misspent youth that has not diminished with the years.

"The Sin of Hyacinth Peuch" is proof that humor and horror can work effectively together as his ironic depictions of a series of hideous murders bring first a smile to the reader's lips before it is replaced by a grimace. "Displaced Person" is a more conventional allegory on whether our national ideals are as firmly established as we might think. But even if this book consisted of just "Rhythm of the Rats" it would be worth every cent. This updated *marschen* has retained all of its power from the first time I read it in this magazine, graced by one of Matt Fox's grotesque covers that managed to capture the malignant idiocy of the tale's villain. If *Thing of Darkness* is best read in multiple sittings, *Darker Tides* can be safely devoured in one sitting; in fact, one might be compelled into doing just that.

THE MOTION DEMON by Stefan Grabinski (Ash-Tree Press, $47.50)

In a previous column I quoted Jean Cocteau to the effect that the English-speaking world had a gift for the tale of the weird and macabre. The Polish writer Stefan Grabinski (1887-1936) is eloquent proof that this gift is not uniquely Anglo-Saxon. His champion and translator Miroslaw Lipinski has followed up the earlier *The Dark Domain* with this first of a series that will reprint all of Grabinski's collections as well as a number of uncollected tales. Grabinski writes in a deceptively simple style that takes the unusual occurrences he describes as matter-of-fact, but this very nonchalance serves to make the overall impression quite memorable. *The Motion Demon* collects his stories about trains, a symbol of man's technological "progress" and the change that it causes in human life and society. "Engineer Driver Grot" is the tale of an isolated loner whose life revolves around his job as a locomotive engineer, and who becomes more and more obsessed with speed. The story works both as a commentary upon the irrelevance of mankind to the universe at large, or as a description of developing obsessive-compulsive disorder. "The Wandering Train" reveals that man's obsession with schedules and routine ultimately counts for nothing.

"The Sloven" is an effective variation upon the banshee theme, where a disheveled and idiotic specter appears whenever chaos is about to erupt into the well-ordered existence of the rail system. "The Perpetual Passenger" contrasts the ideas of motion/change with order/stagnation, creating a character for whom a settled existence is not an option. The title story depict man as being at the mercy of chaotic impulses, equating as it does the train's conquest with space with man's conquest of others in war, making the railway an instrument of chaos. One looks forward to seeing more of this writer's work, as well as other European writers in the genre such as Thomas Owen and Jean Ray.

GASPARD DE LA NUIT by Aloysius Bertrand (Black Coat Press, $20.95)

Another writer whose work, like that of Grabinski, will be new to most readers is the French Romantic poet in prose Aloysuis (or Louis) Bertrand, whose masterpiece *Gaspard de la Nuit* inspired generations of French decadents, from Victor Hugo on through Baudelaire and Verlaine. Bertrand was also a significant influence on the one of the few Americans to embrace the prose poem form, Clark Ashton Smith, both directly through Stuart Merrill's translations and indirectly through the example of Baudelaire. Now Donald Sidney-Fryer has provided a scintillating and accessible translation of this monument to French Romanticism that puts on displays its affinities for the fantastic, the grotesque, and the medieval.

Bertrand was in many ways the prototype of the starving artist. He died in obscurity only to have his work posthumously championed by friends. However, the reader will find no sense of self-pity or sentimentality in his writings, but rather a robust gusto for life and living seasoned with a taste for the macabre and the impious. The work of art closest to it in spirit that comes to mind is Carl Orff's secular cantata *Carmina Burana*, crossed perhaps with the Berlioz of the "March to the Gallows" sequence of *Symphonie fantastique.*

Like Smith, Bertrand draws mental images of extraordinary vividness with his words and delights in doing so: "But me, the iron rod of the executioner, at the first blow, had broken like a glass." Graced with an introduction by T.E.D. Klein and a cover by Gahan Wilson, as well as Sidney-Fryer's own exhaustive and illuminating introduction, *Gaspard de la Nuit* is available directly from the translator (signed upon request) at 6505 Firebrand Street, Los Angeles, Ca 90045 (add four dollars for postage and handling).

HORROR & WEIRDNESS FROM THE PULP FICTION VAULTS...

SINISTER STORIES was a short-lived magazine circa 1940 that sought to thrill and titillate with bizarre stories mixing suspense, horror, and bondage. Tales like "Satan's Studio of Sin" and "White Flesh Must Rot" from the very first issue (now reproduced in facsimile) were classic over-the-top masterpieces!

Few readers have ever heard of **WEIRD TRAILS**, the magazine of supernatural cowboy stories! This very special issue, which appears to have been printed April 1, 1933, features Morbius Mortimer Moamrath's "Riders of the Purple Ooze" as well as work by writers who, mysteriously, continue to publish today, including Mike Resnick, Ron Goulart, Ray Faraday Nelson and more!

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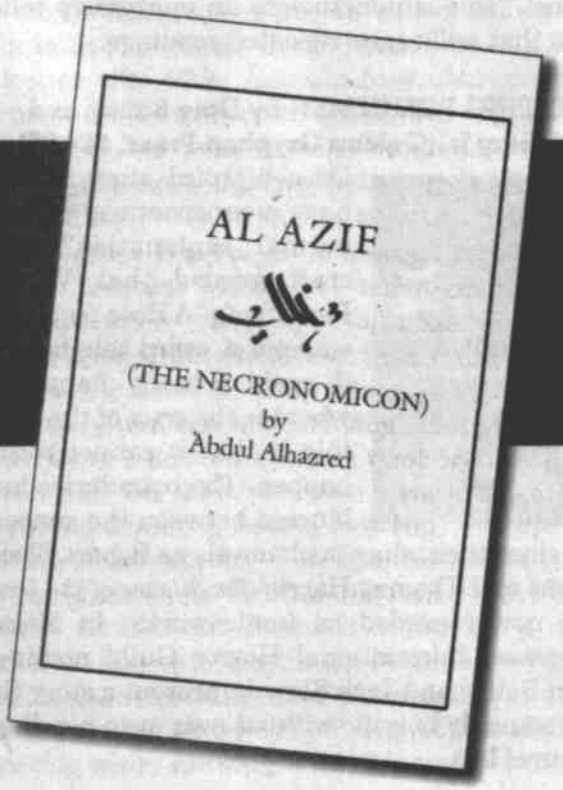

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SONGS AND SONNETS ATLANTEAN:
THE THIRD SERIES by Donald Sidney-Fryer
(Phospor Lantern Press, **$20.95)**

Sidney-Fryer's poetry collection *Songs and Sonnets Atlantean* was the last book published by Arkham House during the lifetime of founder August Derleth. He has now followed that with a third series collecting much of his recent work, some of which has appeared in these pages. A linear descendent of Edmund Spenser by way of the California Romantics (a group that included Clark Ashton Smith, George Sterling and Nora May French), Sidney-Fryer's work emphasizes clarity, accessibility, and simplicity in form — and magic, music, and continuity in content. Included is a dramatic-poem, "The Fugitives," inspired by an uncompleted play of the same name that provided two of the poems in Smith's 1925 collection *Sandalwood;* although I hasten to add that the author does not style this any sort of "collaboration," posthumous or otherwise. There is little here that is terrible, but much that is wondrous, often infused with a fey wit that reflects a gentleness we could only wish were more often found in this world.

BLACK POCKETS AND OTHER DARK THOUGHTS by George Zebrowski (Golden Gryphon Press, $24.95)

Turning to more contemporary writers, let us examine George Zebrowski's *Black Pockets and Other Dark Thoughts.* Like Eric Frank Russell, Zebrowski is not usually thought of as a writer of horror stories, but his first collection in the genre should serve to shatter that preconception. Zebrowski divides his tales into three categories: the Personal, the Political, and the Metaphysical, working outward from the specific to the general, although one wonders how he came to classify each story into their final categories. For instance, "Earth Around His Bones" strikes me as being an expression both of a personal phobia as well as an existential angst about the final state of the human condition. One wonders if "Jumper" is not perhaps a metaphor on man's lack of insight for where his abilities may ultimately lead. The Political Terrors are more pensive studies in magical realism, in which an Undead Fidel Castro continues to linger on long after his relevance has died. The Metaphysical Terrors provide the juiciest tales, as is good and proper after all. Jesus returns as both a victimized derelict and as a supernatural prankster who reveals that we are just part of a science experiment. "Black Pockets" is a study of two souls locked hopelessly in hate so intense that even their own destruction is acceptable as long as their enemy also perishes. "The Lords of Imagination" strikes me as more manifesto than story, with its melancholy recognition that fantasy and horror were truer representations of "our black, anarchic souls, for all that we had leashed, chained, and imprisoned within ourselves" than the bland, sterile optimism of Roddenberry SF. While I would not go as far as Howard Waldrop does in his introduction and equate Zebrowski's achievement with that of Fritz Leiber in "Smoke Ghost," this is nonetheless an impressive collection that will repay repeated readings.

SLEEPING POLICEMEN by Dale Bailey and Jack Slay Jr. (Golden Gryphon Press, $24.95)

Does a weird story have to have a supernatural or paranormal explanation? Lovecraft argued that William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" was not a weird tale because it could actually happen — whereas the crux of the weird tale is that it cannot *possibly* happen. The boundaries have blurred between the genres a bit since then, since such novels as Robert Bloch's *Psycho* and Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* are now regarded as iconic works. In *Sleeping Policemen,* International Horror Guild nominees Dan Bailey and Jack Slay, Jr. present a story that is genuinely horrific without ever even bending a natural law.

Three college students returning from a road trip kill a stranger in a hit-and-run accident. The rich boys want to keep going, but their friend Nick, who comes from a much humbler background, insists on going back and seeing if they can help. From this good intention several miles of Hell are paved as Nick, his friends, and his girl friend Susan are drawn into a nightmarish world of snuff films and runaways overseen by a grotesquely Mabuse-like figure known as the Pachyderm. The authors contrast Nick's own moral strength with the lack of strength

shown by his friends, yet it is apparent that the compromise of that strength is what worsens their situation. There are many self-conscious references to works by Conrad and Fitzgerald that drive this home, but what *Sleeping Policemen* boils down to is how Nick and his friends act when confronted with moral evil.

THE WHITE HANDS AND OTHER WEIRD TALES by Mark Samuels (Tartarus Press, £9.99)

One drawback to the domination of our genre by small-press publishers producing beautiful editions for the collectors' market is that their products are often, if not always, priced out of the reach of the casual reader. It is refreshing to see that Tartarus Press, at least, has reissued one of its most distinguished recent collections in an affordable paperback. To call Mark Samuel's first collection, *The White Hands,* a freshman effort is perhaps the literal truth, but it is a truth that conceals rather than reveals. Samuel's prose is some of the most highly polished and surreal it has been my pleasure to read since I first discovered Thomas Ligotti. He is, like Ligotti, Matt Cardin, Quentin Crisp, and a number of other contemporary writers, something of a counter-realist. One of his characters defends weird fiction on the grounds that "the anthropocentric concerns of realism had the effect of stifling the much more profound study of infinity." Contemplation of the infinite "was the faculty that separated man from beast." Realism "was the literature of the prosaic." This has its roots in writers as diverse as Arthur Machen and Clark Ashton Smith, but Samuels embraces it and makes it his own. Beginning with "The White Hands," he evokes the sense of alienation and sin that pervaded the weird fiction of the Yellow Nineties while drawing a cautionary tale of the hazards of literary research that I for one found a trifle disquieting. "Vrolyck" is what Lovecraft might have written had he done *The Shadow out of Time* from another perspective. He closes it symmetrically with "Black as Darkness," an entertaining ghost story that deals with a never-released British portmanteau horror film that nonetheless still shows up on the shelves of the local videostore where the right person might stumble across it.

THE SHADOW AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD by Thomas Ligotti (Cold Spring, $13)

The attentive reader may correctly deduce that I regard Thomas Ligotti as one of the pre-eminent writers working in the genre today. Much of his best work has been unavailable since the retro spective anthology *The Night mare Factory* went out of print, but now the best of that work has been reissued in a handsome trade paperback, *The Shadow at the Bottom of the World.* Beginning with the deservedly famous "The Last Feast of Harlequinn," an exercise in the sort of pseudorealism pioneered by the latter Lovecraft but run into the ground by Stephen King and Dean Koontz, we enter a world that is not only indifferent to mankind and his aspirations, but possesses an inherent malignancy that gradually manifests itself both physically and spiritually in an ever-widening erosion and degradation of those hopes and aspirations. He tells us in "Vasterien" that "nothing ever known has ended in glory," while "The Tsalal" tells of a "great blackness " [that] has always prevailed." Ligotti is not a writer that one reads for casual entertainment: his vision is too unremitting, too bleakly nihilistic. Like Poe, Lovecraft, and Machen, he is a writer that one reads to understand what lies beneath the surface of our "reality."

Publishers and authors who would like to have their books considered for review in Weird Tales *should send them directly to Scott Connors, 4877 Larson Street Apt. 52, Marysville, CA 95901.*

In which a cowboy Yarn Unexpectedly Reveals Itself to be Something Rather Bizarre

"THE MOON WAS just like this'n," the Lone Hand said. "You see that, how there's that round hole through the clouds, that red ring around the moon. . . . That's how it were that night. . . ." The cowboys looked up at the moon from where they squatted on haunches or sat Indian-like on blankets close by the campfire. One and then two of them nodded, seeing the red ring around the moon — and some other colors too, violet and a kind of blue with emerald mixed into it. But the red, they allowed, surely was the brightest ring. Old Partridge chirped up that there was no gainsaying the ring was the color of dried blood on dark blue fabric. It could not be denied.

It was the misty September of 1885, in Wyoming Territory, up in that region some folks called Montana. The drovers were engaged in a cattle drive. They had started from where the beef'd been fattening through the summer, on the Norther' Chaparrals, and were on their way down to the government buyer for the Cavalry at Fort Laramie. They were driving late in the month and there was anxiety that it might snow up in these piney hills, but there was only that thin scree of cloud over the moon.

The Lone Hand was called by this monicker because in the few days he had ridden with the outfit he had expressed a preference for working alone and, it was true, never failed to keep the cows that were his responsibility on the trail, needing no one to back him up. Now he broke off his story, musing to himself a moment, so that Kid Dreed — a boy of scarcely eighteen — prompted him, "Go on and say, what 'tis that hoppen on a night like this. We got a tradichin here."

The Lone Hand was a lean sandy-haired man in a ragged duster and cracking black chaps. His black hat cupped his face in shadow as he nodded slowly, acknowledging young Dreed. "The tradition," he said, "of telling an adventure — true or untrue — on the drive around the fire of a night. Why, I am no man to buck tradition, boys, it's just that I do not quite know where to begin. This here story is one that has burned like the Consumption in my breast these many years, but I do not believe I have told it to anyone — and yet I know it well.

"It is like one of those Mexican saddles with the printings-on of horses and women and guns and, why, even volcanoes — so smartly worked into the leather that it's all one picture like a vine of ivy; a man doesn't know where it starts or finishes.

"Well now — I reck' that I will begin with that moon overhead. And I will tell you that this story is no

windy. Regardless, boys, what you may suppose when you hear it, I swear this story is true... It began in the autumn of my fourteenth year, just fifteen years ago — oh yes, boys, I'm younger than folks take me to be. . . . That moon, now . . ."

I WATCHED IT most the way as I drove the buggy home (said the Lone Hand), on an early autumn night much like this one: that glaring moon, like a bullet punching the clouds; that ring of red, bleeding over on them thin clouds. I wished I had Consuela there to interpret: for as a boy I'd had a Mexican wetnurse, who fed me my breakfast some years after she ceased to suckle me, and it was she who taught me a respect for omens. Well, I said to myself, if that red ring moon ain't an omen, then what is?

I traveled a rutty old trail, I remember, in the foothills of the Tetons — country not much different from this here, boys. I had failed to keep my eye on that treasonable old rut, nearly lettin' the horses stumble down the steep hillside, in my spooked distraction at the red glare of that moon. So it was that — cursing the team for hammerheads, trying to regain control — I did not at first see the shine of fire in Crying Buck Hollow and was nearly upon our homestead before I knew that it was aflame.

Our house was no sod hut. The sod hut that we had begun in, it leaned out back and now was used for hanging meat and salting and the making of potations. The main house was of planed wood, fully two rooms and a loft, where I slept. There were two acres of corn and beans between the creek and the house and a pig wallow and a little lean-to barn. Most of my father's money was made through timber cutting taken right from that stand of trees on our land, for he was a woodworker. But we also sold some pigs and corn and venison, too, and did well enough.

Many days I felt a great comfort, standing with my father on this same hill, looking down into the hollow, contemplating our homestead and how it had flourished. There was a sadness mingled in, for the graves of my mother and sister were visible from here too,in the daytime, in that hummock of higher ground along the creek, north of the house. Yet the house had seemed its own reply to that sadness — till now it had seemed to say, "You abide, still."

Now the comforting sight of that house was churning in gold and blue, such a prodigious fire that a single flame consumed all and only the house's skeleton was visible, black and red in the inferno.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had stood in the buggy and whipped the team down into the hollow, though they shied at approaching the fire. Could have been, however, the body of my father that spooked them for it was directly in our trail, about forty paces from the burning house. I jumped down from the buggy and ran to him, but somehow knew that he was dead before I found he was shot through the head, front to back, the back of his skull a wet ruin nor yet dried.

This and the vigor of the flame convinced me that the murderers could not be far gone. Weeping and shouting I knew not what, I took a burning brand in one hand and in the other my father's rifle — which I found fallen not far from where he lay — and searched in a widening circle around the fire.

I found the track of a shoeless horse, and not too heavy a mount. Only one. It could be the pony of an Indian; but there were also mountain men in that territory, who rode their mounts shoeless, preferring to spend blacksmith money on whiskey and women when they came to town.

The tracks wound back onto the same trail I had come in on, then turned to follow a stream that crossed the way, a quarter-mile back. And there I lost it.

For a time I sat on a low, mossy boulder, contemplating the ringed moon coming and going in the stream's reflection, and pondering:

I had no doubt that the man who had killed my father was also the man who set our home afire. This was a sign of a completed vengeance in those places and at that time: you kill the man and you burn his cabin, too. If it was an act of vengeance, I could not be entirely surprised. My father was a good worker, but not altogether a good man. When he was in drink he gambled, and when he gambled he lost, and when he lost he grew surly and more than once had been obliged to spend a fortnight in the log jailhouse in Winslow for assaulting some tinhorn — or some man he asserted a tinhorn.

Losing my mother and sister to the smallpox had soured him, too, and given him over to drink and all that followed on drink.

Still, though he spoke rarely, he was not unkind to me. He had allowed me to go to school twice a week, and sometimes chose to set me to cutting wood till midnight as a punishment, when he might have beaten me for my boyish mischief. He liked to sit with me by the fire, while I read to him from almanacs and catalogues, and seemed proud of me when I explained to him the meaning of certain words. These were the memories I cherished; not the recollections of a drunken brutish-ness, or the loss of his poke, nor the time he had to take the mercury cure for the dirties some whore had given him, and how sick that

made him, and what it done to his teeth.

"It may be," I said to that red-robed moon in the water, "that my Pa done something he should not, and got his due for it. But here I sit, fed and clothed, lived to fourteen years old — nigh to fifteen — and that is his doing and none other. I will have revenge for him. I swear it on the blood of this ringed moon."

I went back to the homestead. The fire was burned down some, was them mean little blue flames, licking around the ruins of the house. I saw a wild dog or a wolf, I don't know which, beginning to tug at Papa's ankle, trying, maybe, to drag him back to its den. I shot at it and missed. I was never much of a shot. But the wolf showed its heels and fled into the darkness.

I remember noticing how much darker the woods seemed with Papa dead. Or maybe it was just the way the clouds had thickened up.

There were planks under a Conestoga tarp behind the house. It started to rain before I was done building his coffin. It wasn't as good as he would have built — he built many a coffin — but I was not ashamed of it. Lifting him into the box, I started bawling again. I made myself stop — it was almost like I heard his voice telling me to stop playing the crybaby — and I closed the lid, and didn't look at his face before I nailed the coffin shut. My only tintype of my father had charred up in the fire, and I regretted I could not have a camera-worker take a death picture of him, for remembrance pictures of the dead was all the rage in them days. But there was no time for that.

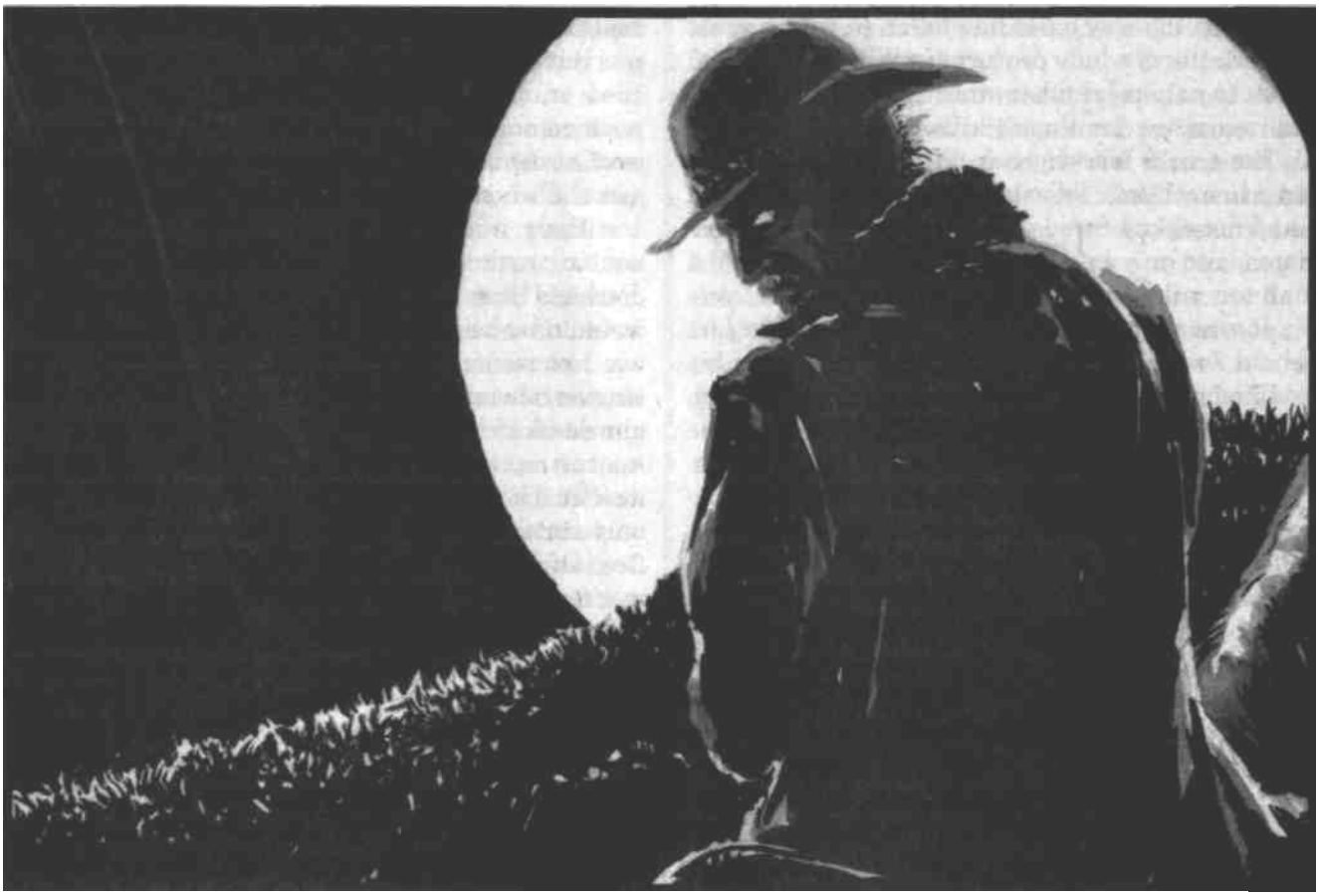
Mindful of that wild dog or wolf, I buried Papa deep, though the rain was making the grave fall in around my ankles by the time I was done.

Boys, it was a full two weeks before I knew who had done this thing to my father, for his fate was a year in the making.

I ranged in the buggy first to Winslow, but could find no one there who had a particular onus against the old man and the way people gossip I sure would've heard something. I feared the winter snows—even as we fear them now, boys—but even so I would not be dissuaded and drove the team up the mountains to Chokee, finding no word of him; and then down to the reservations near the border. For there was a power of gambling on them reservations, though every man knows it's as ruinous for an Indian to gamble as to drink. There I met an Indian named Broken Eye, a one-eyed Indian medicine man; he was a grizzled, white-haired old man who spoke a pretty good English, having endured the tender miseries of the missionaries as a boy. It was he who threw, the seeing bones for me and said I was to look in a town to the north where there was much of the metals that white men killed for. I didn't know how Papa could have ranged so far, but I set out. I was nearly run through Papa's poke as well as what I got selling the pig, when I come to the silver-flush town of Parker.

Papa was a man with a cast in one eye and missing his teeth on that same side of his face. Any study of him at all impressed these traits on the memory. So it was that he was remembered in Parker as the man with a crooked eye who chewed on the other side of his mouth because of his teeth missing exactly from the middle to the left.

About eleven months earlier, he had gone to Parker, where he was unknown, perhaps fearing that the marshal in Winslow would be watching him with an unreasonable acuity. Seems he had heard that a silver strike, a day's ride north of Parker, had enriched the town entirely through the foolhardiness of the miners. For there were five gambling halls in Parker and little else.



I remembered the occasion as the time my father had gone to buy a plow mule, so he said, and was "robbed by highwaymen" on the way back. I had been skeptical even then.

In Parker he had run afoul of a fur-trapping mountain man turned prospector. This was Elmore Jansen, son of "Swede" Jansen, the noted buffalo hunter. Papa had engaged in stud poker with this younger Jansen — thinking him a "lamb" to be led — and found him instead a cunning artist of the pasteboards, or at least not fool enough to drink whiskey while playing cards. Not to stretch it, Papa lost his all and, staggering drunk, he called Jansen a cheat. Jansen pulled his gun but misfired — for it was a damp night — and Papa, to his ironical misfortune, was able to fire his rifle first at near point blank range, shooting this younger Jansen through the breast. He did not die immediately, I am informed, but lingered the whole night calling for a messenger to bring his own father from the plains up North.

After conferring in private with the local constable and giving him his gold watch, Papa was able to persuade him that, though the other's gun had misfired, it was a fair fight as Jansen had drawn first. The constable made a noise about driving Papa out of town, but the short of it is he winked and let him go.

It was some six months before anyone ran into Swede Jensen and thought to give him the last request from his dying son. It was another three months before Swede judged it the time to begin his search for his son's killer and, so I surmised, two more before he found him. Swede rode an Indian pony, it was said, and always unshod. I was sure I had my man. Furthermore, I was told that Swede, on the way back, had fallen in with a great suety chunk of a lady procurer in Winslow and had taken to helping run her whores. So all the time I was searching for Papa's killer, he was warming his bone in a fat whore in Winslow, the nearest town to my home. I'd asked in Winslow first — but I had not asked Swede Jensen, nor his close associates, and only he and they knew he had killed a man ten miles away in Crying Buck Hollow.

It was the day of the first snow when I at last beheld Swede Jensen. I stood near the door of his establishment, in a ruck of melting snow and mud. It was difficult to see him, so thick was the smoke of pipes and twists in the Lady Day.

The establishment had pretensions to an elegance *it had never completely accomplished. On* one side of the room was a velvet settee; above it a portrait of dancing, scarcely clad maidens in the French style, the oil almost too big for the wall. A wind came in, sometimes, through knot-holes, and made the portrait

jump, the ladies to truly dance. On the other side was the bar — which, by contrast, was just two raw planks over wooden barrels — and a shelf of bottles. Between bar and portrait were gaming tables, keno and poker tables, and a spin-the-wheel (as Papa had called it.) The whores—in dirty gowns that had trailed in mud tracks, their hair greasy and their noses running — squeezed the men at the tables and whispered to them and often as not were back-handed for their trouble. Miss Day, the procurer, was not to be seen; it was said she usually lay abed upstairs with opium or laudanum. But Swede Jensen was immediately apparent. I had heard him described, and knew the man with the graying mane of blond hair, the flowing beard, the laughing blue eyes, and the brace of pistols in his coat, as my father's killer.

He was half sprawled on the settee, wearing a fur coat and a silken weskit, a tall whisky glass in one hand, on a thigh, his other not too far from the butt of a pistol slanted across his belly. He was laughing as a whore cursed a reluctant young farmhand for an "unmanly bastard".

I stood in the door and imagined what I might say before I did the deed. I would stand with my back to a wall, take a bead on his chest and shout, "Oh, what a brave irony, sir! You are a father who has avenged your son; I am a son who will avenge his father! I bid you goodbye — and let Satan bid you hello!"

And boom! I'd squeeze the trigger on the word hello and pray there would be no misfire.

But as I stood there, with my father's rifle cradled in my arms as if casual, Swede Jensen seemed to feel some malignancy toward himself and he turned his head, looking from one to the next, till his eyes met mine. He ceased to laugh, but the grin remained and his eyes were like ice coating granite. I saw a stillness in him then. Perhaps he saw in me a resemblance to my father; it could be he'd heard I'd been looking,

I knew for a certainty that if I threatened him, or even thought too hard about it, he would shoot me dead. He was known to be a fine shot and, in a contest up to Cheyenne, had come in second only to Bill Hickock. He would shoot me dead of an *instant and my father* would *never be avenged.*

Of course I could backshoot him, and would not hesitate to do so, if that was the only way the business could be done. But looking at him, I saw an Indian charm around his neck; indeed, there were two and three of them on a thong. This and the preternatural fug of the man convinced me that he would know were I awaiting him in an alley, or in the trees by the trail. He had made some unsavory deal with the Indian spirits, I was sure, and could not be killed so easily.

As I reflect on it now, I'm sure the supernatural dread was my boyish imagination. Remember that I was only just fifteen years in the world, two days before.

But at the time I was as satisfied of his magical protection as the expectation of night following day.

So I turned away, puzzling out what I might do. I reasoned that, hoodoo or not, I was too much a boy to take on so powerful a man alone and if he was protected by Indian medicine, then I might seek out the same.

This put me in mind of Broken Eye.

It was to this Indian I now returned. I had to sell one of my horses and the buggy and rode on a folded blanket for a saddle back to the reservation. Along the way, I thought to glimpse a horseman, pacing me, a black silhouette against the sky, now and again. Was it Swede? The sight provoked me to rowel my old bay, till the horse was quivering with weariness.

It was a bone chilling dawn atop a treeless bluff when I found the medicine man just entering his sweat-lodge. Broken Eye was not pleased to see me and asked me to come back in the new moon. I insisted on remaining and gave him most of what money remained to me. Told him I thought my Father's killer was after me and I had, anyway, sworn vengeance on this man.

Broken Eye said I must come into his sweat lodge, then, and wait till he was good and ready to speak. I followed him down stairs cut into the clay, into a kind of trench covered over with hide, and a smouldering darkness.

There followed a long day of hot, choking, stinking wretchedness, as we sat in the smokiest comer of the sweatlodge, both of us glossy wet, my eyes and lungs aching with the smoke of the acrid weeds he threw on the coals. The old man seeming unaffected, but only chanting to himself and swaying. At last when I, too, was swaying — but only because I was near to falling asleep or dead — he asked me, "Boy, when you swore to vengeance, what was the sky like that night?"

"I swore it under the red-ringed moon, because it looked so like the blood on my father's forehead," I said.

"And this rider you seen followin' you, did you see what he wore or his face?"

"A droopy hat and a long coat is all I could make out. Maybe he was too thin to be Swede, but he

could've been Swede's man."

"He was not. I have seen it. It was you yourself who summoned this rider. He is not Swede or Swede's Man. He is the one who wears the spurs of hawk claw and whose horse is mad and who should be long with his ancestors and is not. But go to him and ask him to do the deed and the deed will be done. There are warnings I should give you, but it is too late for them — just go, and take back your money. You will pay and pay enough."

Such was Broken Eye's speech to me. And I did not doubt him. He had about him a surety that said he knew things that others could not know. It was like the knowing of a tree, how it knows to grip the ground against the galestorm. It was a part of his substance.

So I set out on the. trail again, riding slow now, and watching the hills. By and by I see the dark rider on the horizon, poised there and watching me. I lifted my hat and waved for him to come and then made camp under an oak tree, by a stream. Here there was only a little snow, in sickly patches, but the ground was frozen hard under me and I shivered where I squatted with my coffeepot and my weak little fire, waiting for him.

I fell asleep hunkered on my blanket, waiting, and only woke at the sound of horse's hooves—my own horse, pulling up its stake and running off, whinnying in fear.

I looked up to see him riding to a stop at the edge of the firelight. He seemed to have more darkness around him than the moonlit night should've allowed. I could see only his outline, unremarkable, rather like a circuit rider's shape. Maybe I was mistaken about this man, I thought, maybe he was just a wandering preacher.

"You called to me," came the voice, like a rustling of dry leaves.

"Are you the one the Indian spoke of?"

"That could be. Some will speak so. There is someone to kill, boy?"

I knew then who this was, and no mistake. The one the Indian had spoke of. "There is someone to kill," I said. "He is Swede Jensen, lately of the Lady Day in Winslow, who murdered my father. I have little enough to pay you, but I can fetch back my horse and give you him and you can have my land and I can owe you."

"Will you give me coffee?"

This surprised me, somehow, but I assented and he got off his horse, a black gelding so quiet it wasn't natural. The gunman came just close enough to the fire to take a tin cup, but not close enough to show his face, which was angled down under that drooping hat.

He took the cup in hands so dirty they were the color of a coal mine and his nails were almost as long as a woman's, but foul. I heard him make a loud slurping. His horse shied a little at the sound and lifted its head — the sight of this horse made me rock back on my haunches, boys, for I could've sworn that it had no eyes, but only holes crusted shut and its mouth streamed a red foam.

"Thankee," the stranger said, standing. I glimpsed a long-barreled pistol stuck in his belt without a holster. "I could like to taste that coffee, so strong it was. I will take your case to this Swede."

"And the price?"

He paused and looked at the sky. I could not see his face. He said, "I have ridden too long and killed so much I can no longer feel the killing. I have been waiting for the right caller to give me rest and I believe I've found him. That is payment enough."

I did not understand him and would have said so but he strode away. When he swung onto his blind horse, I saw his spurs in the moonlight: they were neither iron like a cowboy's nor brass like a blue-leg's, but were made of hawk-claws fitted smartly into silver. Such spurs as I'd never seen nor heard of. Such as no respecter of horses would wear. He struck the scarred-up flanks of the horse with them hawk-claw spurs and the gelding screamed and blood ran down its patchy hide, and off he rode . . . toward Winslow.

No more could I sleep that night, so I searched along the creek bank till I found my horse and gentled him down and struck camp and set off for Winslow myself.

The next night I was riding up to the Lady Day, with a tingle in my neck, sensing that fate was bearing its fruit and not a minute more would pass without that apple plucked, and so it was. Swede was coming out into the muddy street, standing in the yellow light of the Lady Day's doorway, laughing with a long-bearded companion — some fellow mountain man come to see him, I've since heard — when his laughter came up short in his throat, seeing a man step off his horse and approach him.

Now I had ridden up just seconds before and was thirty paces away, sitting my steed and watching, almost afraid for Swede, almost ready to call out a warning to him, though there was no sense in that at all.

If folks catch the smallpox and the blisters don't break but spread and something black is coughed up, why, it follows like the darkness of the moon that the sick one will die every time. I knew, for a surety, as I watched the hawk-spurred gunman step down from his horse and step once and twice toward Swede that death was in the offing, just as surely as seeing the finishing signs of smallpox.

"Swede Jensen," came the gunman's dried-out voice, "you have killed a man and left a boy without a father before the boy is ready. You have shot a man in vengeance and burned his home to the ground. Now is justice come to you, sir, and I bid you goodnight."

That was almost as good a speech as the one I'd had in mind and I felt my heart leap with joy as the gunman's pistol leapt into his hand — so it had looked, too, like it jumped to his hand and not the other way — and though Swede was drawing too, cursing in Swedish, the fire leapt from the gunman's pistol first, fire the same color as the flame that had swallowed my home. Four times that pistol boomed and flamed and both men spun, Swede and his friend both, spinning in place for a moment, once around each as if to screw into the ground. Then they were fallen in the mud. There was screaming from the second floor window of the Lady Day, but no one showed their face and the gunman turned calmly and mounted his horse and rode off.

I went to look at Swede, to be sure. He was shot through the head, just like my father had been. Then I found myself riding after the gunman, though it was pure folly to do so. I had a hunger to thank him — or perhaps it was out of fear, somehow, that I wanted to thank him. And something else was prodding me. . . .

Yes, boys, there was something else. I wanted to see his face. It just didn't feel complete and done, till I knew the face of the man I had called to kill my father's murderer.

As I rode, I thought to myself that I should be going in the opposite direction. Consider, I says to myself, how you came to meet this man; how he seemed to hear you call for vengeance; how the Indian said he come. Why go begging for further truck with the Devil?

But I could not help myself. I had to know.

So I found him on the trail — by that very boulder, near the spring where I had first sworn vengeance. I stopped my horse, and I tell you boys, I could hear my heart pounding like an Indian torn. But I had to know, I plain had to know.

The dark gunman sat still as a holstered gun on his mount, waiting for me. I spurred my horse closer — it had to be spurred hard, he did not want to approach the other mount or the rider neither. But, my horse rearing, I was at last close enough.

I fumbled in my coat and found a lucifer and struck its sulfur on my thumbnail and by the light of the match I saw his face.

A long lean face, gaunt and still. His skin seemed blue or yellow; maybe that was just the matchlight. His beard was as patchy as his horse's hide. His lips were papery-tight over his teeth. But it was his eyes, boys — his eyes were glazed gray, like a snake's eyelid. They never blinked, though I raised the match close to that face. They were the eyes of a dead man. He looked out from those eyes, though — something way back behind them was looking out at me, though they never moved in their sockets. Could not move, I judged.

I cried out and dropped the match, and my horse reared and threw me. I fell heavily, lay dazed for a

moment, one hand in the ice-cold creek.

At last I got to my feet, groaning with my bruises. I felt the loom of his horse over me.

"I'm glad you follered me," said the hawk-spur gunman. "I'm glad you come and seen my face. That's the last part of it, except for this —"

Then he kicked out, his spurs flashed in the starlight and he slashed me deep across the cheek with those hawk-claw spurs.

I screamed and fell to my knees, clutching my face. He got down off his horse and took my wrist and I felt something cold pressed into my hand — it was his six-gun.

"Now, you son of a bitch, you will pay me for what I done for you. You owe me for the killing of Swede Jensen and the avenging of your father."

I don't know how I understood what he was asking, but I did. Them cuts from the hawk-spur were burning on my face and someway, once that happened, I seemed to know what to do. I lifted up that heavy pistol, with two hands, and shot him through the head and then his horse the same. I found some kerosene in his saddle bags, as if brought for this purpose. I set both bodies on fire and then once more I went in search of my horse.

Well boys, I drifted far from that territory, down to Texas, then out to Arizona territory. I spent some time around Tombstone; then up to Montana way. I learned to shoot straight and fast and for the first time learning the gun seemed to come easy to me. But I never killed another man till I was nineteen. A woman was dragged down and ruined by two saddletramps and she pleaded me her cause. I found them on the trail and shot them both, and that was the beginning of the life I lead now.

Many times I've done that red and smoky work. You might've heard of Johnny Ringo — was me who shot him in the head, and set him in that forked treetrunk.

Then I come to a little town up north of here where some cowboys, not long ago, hurrahed Main Street. A man's wife was killed by one of those cowboys, who was only shooting at a lamp and never intended to kill that woman. But one of those cowboys killed her — and in all the promiscuous shooting no one was quite sure who. So the man says to me, don't do it here in town, but join their outfit, and up in the mountains . . . kill them all. Kill them all, and I will pay you well.

AND SAYING THOSE words, the Lone Hand stood and drew his pistol. Kid Dreed had guessed the Lone Hand's purpose and old Partridge and Jimmy D'onfrio, too, and were up and pulling, but it was too late — the Lone Hand was aiming and firing with never a misfire and every one of those cowboys went down, shot lethal.

There was another — the cook, an old man, a former schoolteacher, hiding under his chuckwag-on — who had not been with the party hurrahing that town. The Lone Hand turned and regarded the frightened old man, and, thoughtfully reloading his gun, said, "You may live, if you swear to tell the tale I have told here tonight, for I would have it known as a warning to those who would otherwise cry for vengeance under the red ringed moon. . . . And who might be cursed with a loneliness that's like what a man feels who dies forgotten in a cave that no one knew he crawled into."

The cook swore to tell it all at the next opportunity.

Then Kid Dreed, shot through the middle, squirmed and grunted and the Lone Hand saw that he was not quite dead. "Let me go," the boy sobbed, "I shot no one in that town, I swear it."

"Boy, you are gutshot and to kill you is a mercy or you will die in a pain you cannot imagine. But to tell you the truth ..." He cocked his gun and aimed it. "I would kill you anyway, no matter what or how, since the man who paid me swore vengeance on all of you and it's my nature, you see, to kill in vengeance — it has been my nature since that hawk-spur cut my cheek that night and will be my nature long after I'm dead."

So saying, he fired twice and the boy lay still forever after.

THEN THE LONE Hand found his mount and rode off under that brooding moon and, so it seemed to the cook, rode right up onto the bloody path the red-ringed moon made in the gathering mist and into places beyond.

JOHN SHIRLEY: Cyberpunk and Just Plain Punk

~ INTERVIEW BY PAULA GURAN ~

It's hard to think of an author who has broken out of more jails than John Shirley — the jails, that is, of genre. He's busted out of horror, science fiction, suspense, fantasy . . . you name it. No literary walls can confine his writing; the only classification applicable is *sui generis*,

Shirley's life, which has included a night or two in real jail cells, is as unique as his work. No matter what legends you may come across, the truth — good or bad — is usually even more bizarre. He is a natural-born eccentric, brilliantly autodidactic, and a passionate seeker of the spiritual as well as human and political justice. His writing is informed by experience: a personal knowledge of extreme people, mental, and emotional states; insight and an empathetic connection to both the completely alien and the deeply human; damnation and redemption. And there is a small but essential part of John Shirley that, even now, remains delightfully unpredictable and uncivilized — you are never quite sure just what he will do next.

His first professional short-story sales came in the early seventies while he was fronting a variety of punk rock bands, including Sado-Nation, in Portland, Oregon. First novels were *Transmaniacon* (1979) and *Dracula In Love* (1979) — which Shirley wrote much of while still in his teens. *His City Come A-Walkin'* (1980) is acknowledged as the first cyberpunk novel, and a stint living in France provided the European background crucial to another seminal cyberpunk epic, his *A Song Called Youth* trilogy.

Back in the States and living in Los Angeles in the late '80s, Shirley began working as a screenwriter — and also as a songwriter for the legendary band Blue Oyster Cult (a relationship that continues to this day). He wrote the early drafts of the script for the gothic comic-book movie *The Crow,* released in 1994; the same year saw the release of the Sylvester Stallone/Sharon Stone thriller *The Specialist*, based on series of books Shirley wrote under the pseudonym John Cutter.

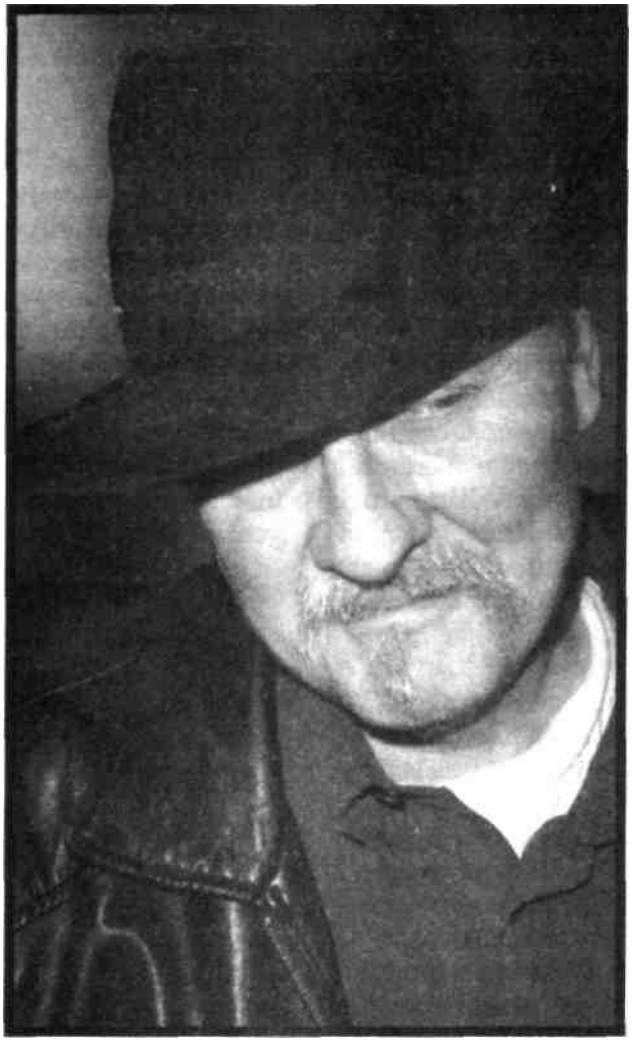
He began working and recording with his post-punk band, the Panther Moderns, in 1995, and a year later published the science fiction novel *Silicon Embrace.* In 1997 he moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where he still lives. In 1998, "Cram" won an IHG award as best short story; he repeated the next year with the collection *Black Butterflies: A Flock on the Darkside.*

Recent novels have included *Demons* (2000), *The View From Hell* (2001), *Her Hunger* (2001), *And the Angel with Television Eyes* (2001), *Spider Moon* (2002), and *Crawlers* (2003). His first nonfiction book, *Gurdjieff: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas*, was published in 2004. Shirley's spectacularly original novel *The Other End* will be out this fall, and his short-story collection *Living Shadows* is forthcoming in spring 2007.

WEIRD TALES recently had the pleasure of listening into a wide-ranging conversation between Shirley and his literary agent, Paula Guran.

WEIRD TALES: YOU occasionally reference H.P. Lovecraft in your work (as in "Buried in the Sky," p. 58), but unlike many writers who deal with the weird — Ramsey Campbell, for one, comes immediately to mind — you never went through "the school of Lovecraft." Do you see yourself as influenced by HPL?

JOHN SHIRLEY: I went through the "Junior High School of Lovecraft," because that's when I was first reading him big time. I read all I could find and I sent away to Arkham House for *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (a work I still admire) and even *Fungi From Yuggoth,* a collection of his highly uneven but charmingly outre poetry. I remember not getting my books from Arkham fast enough and after six weeks or so sending them a postcard demanding them. Then I got wind of some of HPL's personal prejudices and this put me off him for twenty-five years or so. (I'm told a biography of Lovecraft reveals that in the latter part of his life he emerged from the dim caverns of prejudice and became rather progressive.)



I recently re-read a number of his works and I can see that he was a master storyteller, mor-dantly imaginative. I think a lot of his writing effects were borrowed from certain works by Poe, and someday I'm going to write an essay showing which of Poe's works specifically helped form Lovecraft's distinctive voice.

Lovecraftian imagery crops up, flailing its rubbery tentacles, in my novel *Wetbones* and perhaps a bit in *A Splendid Chaos* (which is now out in a new edition from Babbage Books). *Cellars* (also recently re-published) includes a touch of Lovecraft.

WT: But with *Wetbones,* you combined a grisly serial killer with the tentacles. Even when you use supernatural elements your weird seems more reflective of "the times in which we live" or "the individual going over edge" ... the psychological and the personal. So where, would you say, does your sense of the weird come?

JS: I wrote a song for the Blue Oyster Cult called "The Real World" (it's on the *Heaven Forbid* album), which describes weird events and then says "the real world is weird enough for me." I regard "normal" life itself as a bizarre phenomenon. I have always felt somewhat disassociated from the deep sense of identification with the process of living life as a human being on this backwater planet. I have easily fallen into what Dali called "the paranoid critical method," which, simplified, means looking at things around you as if you'd never seen them before. This is a world of rampant parasitism in the animal world; of media becoming the dominant shared reality in the human world, resulting in modern mankind living in a vast, dreamlike, interlinked marketing organism. If I evoke the bizarre, it's only poetry about life as I see it.

Then again, in this new story, "Buried in the Sky," we see the ordinary modern world, a big high-rise yet, revealed as becoming more and more alien, a piece at a time, so that the nightmarish otherworldly aspects integrate until we accept them as part of the "ordinary" world — and then all is literally inverted; and the stygian metaphysical substructure, hidden in the darkness of the collective unconscious, is exposed as the true reality . . . well.

WT: You mentioned Poe and you've been called "the postmodern Poe." Do you think that's apt?

JS: I read a lot of Poe as a youth and read a biography of him recently. He was a talented, gifted bumbler — I've got the humbler part down, anyway. But I do think that I am capable of creating state-of-mind as literary atmosphere with a high degree of control; and my use of words, in a modern dialect, is not

dissimilar. I am drawn to the dark romanticism of the nineteenth century, too, and it crops up in my work.

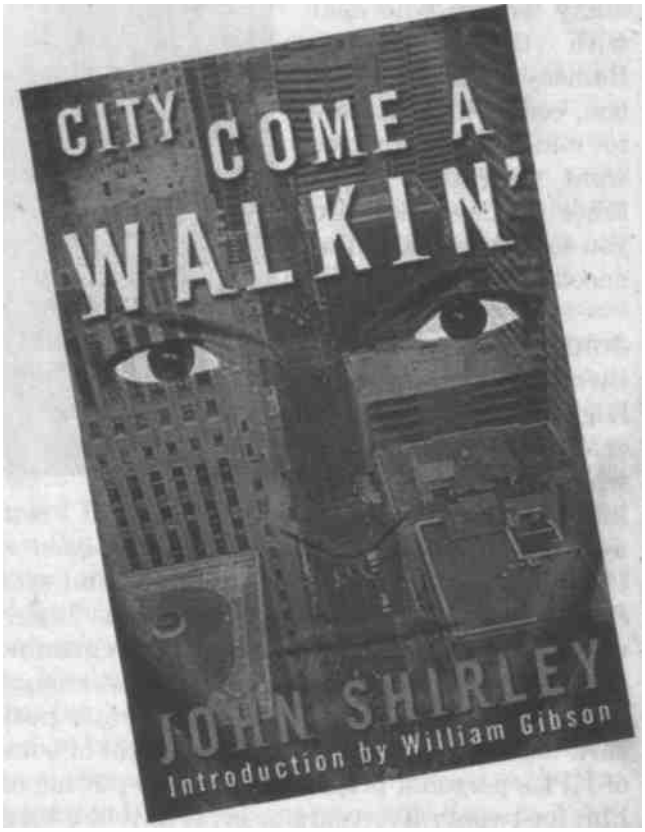
WT: Poe, of course, wasn't a "genre writer." We typified your authorial life as being "jailed" by genre in the introduction. Do you feel this is true?

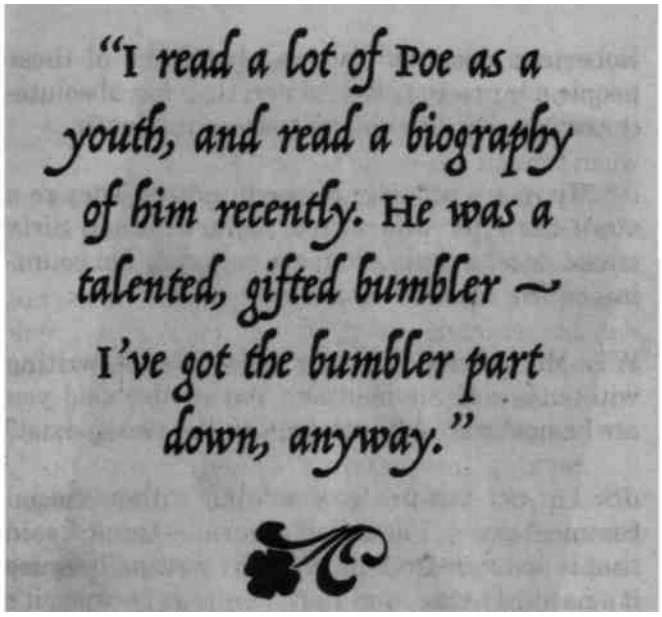
JS: I feel it is mostly what has happened. No use whining about it now. When I was young it seemed to me there was a revolution in science fiction and horror and fantasy, as represented, for example, by the "new wave" writers and the *Dangerous Visions* books. There was some misplaced optimism that suggested that science fiction and fantasy could be absorbed into the mainstream, or at least into literary respectability — partly because of crossovers like Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Ursula Le Guin. And it seemed to me that these genres were places where one could make a statement, where the metaphors for allegory were very rich and also the cyberpunk thing was emerging — the sensibility that fused science fiction with William Burroughsian/Pynchonesque perceptions. There were great talents like Ballard and Ellison to be inspired by, too. So I was seduced by all this and threw myself into the SF pulp vat, headlong. I wasn't much suited for it, or it for me.

My rock'n'roll-infused early cyberpunk novel *City Come A-Walkin'* was a freakish Frankenstein monster of a book. Eclipse was too leftist for most of SF and too SF for the left. Plus I was not mature enough as a writer to really break through — I was too hasty, too impulsive, too improvisational in the early days.

I began to feel that I'd made the wrong choice in breaking into writing through genre. But I have a love for the genres too — Jack Vance, Bruce Sterling, Zelazny, Lovecraft, imaginative people with great literary voices — and so my jailbreaking was always from the cellblock, but never quite entirely out from the prison walls.

It's an agreeable prison, however. We basically run it. The warden is usually drunk. I will say, though, that after I became a teenager I read at least as much outside the genre as within it — I read avant-garde writers, I read nineteenth-century imagist poets, I read early twentieth-century novelists of all stripes . . . and this informs my writing in whatever genre or non-genre I take it into.




"I read a lot of Poe as a youth, and read a biography of him recently. He was a talented, gifted bumbler ~ I've got the bumbler part down, anyway."

Also many of my stories are not tales of the fantastic, they are based on my knowledge of the dark side of the "real" world, stories like "Cram" and "Nineteen Seconds," "Jodie and Annie on TV," "Barbara," "What Would You Do for Love?" and so many other short works. You see, right there I'm resisting pigeonholing again.

WT: But without genre, would you have become a writer?

JS: It did give me an easier place to break into. But I think I would, in time, have started writing for "little literary" magazines, I would have taken the Charles Bukowski route (in terms of publishing) perhaps. As for why I started writing, it was because that's what there was for me — it was the only thing I was good at. Also I looked around at the world and found I had a great deal to say about it and couldn't rest till I'd said it. It may be significant that I first published in underground political publications.

WT: In truth, you're a "literary" writer rather than a genre writer, but you were writing "trans-gressive" fiction before it was lit-chic. You've always pushed the edge, even when you were considered a "science fiction writer" . . .

JS: William Burroughs was writing "transgres-sive" fiction in the 1950s and he mixed science-fiction imagery with drug-induced delirium and paranoiac insight, although he was probably indifferent to science fiction per se. I was trying to write within the sf genre — but writing to subvert it. My dark stories have little to do with the "genre" of horror — they attempt to do what horror is supposed to do but seldom does: subvert.

WT: What does William Gibson mean when he calls you an "outsider artist"?

JS: You'd have to ask him. But I suppose it's a term for artists who stand outside the mainstream to comment on it — they use imagery that will seem very "outside" (which is even an admiring pop cultural term, in music and poetry, for "odd" or "weird" imagery). Being outside means you can see things objectively and you have a wide variety of imagery to draw from-and you can have a feeling of freshness that, you hope, is exhilarating.

WT: You were, shall we say, not like other sci-fi guys. Sterling says he, Gibson, Rucker, et al., were, as Sterling has out it, really pretty normal in a rumpled, but button-down way, while you were "a total bottle-of-dirt screaming dog-collar yahoo."
JS: I pushed out the envelope, wherever I was. Sometimes it was meaningful; sometimes it was not much better than self-indulgence, a consequence of my boredom with the droning nerdi-ness of, for example,

parties at sf cons. I grew out of much of it, but I'm sure I'm marked by it. I'm somewhat eccentric. I still perform musically at times and somewhat wildly. *[Note: Hear for yourself: unvw.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/hear.html]* Though not as much as when I was lead singer of punk bands — tearing up Christmas trees from the corners of the stage and humping them across the room as I sang, jumping onto people's tables, smashing beer bottles in the process, getting into fights onstage with other bands . . . ah, those were the days!

WT: Perhaps, on that nostalgic note, it would be best to go back to literature . . . Genre at least allowed you to publish things like the metaphysical *Demons* and, now, *The Other End.*

JS: People like Atwood and Vonnegut and Aldous Huxley — a writer I very much admire, especially his *Time Must Have A Stop* — and George Orwell and Philip Wylie and C.S. Lewis and J.G. Ballard, later on, did it; so could I. *Demons* isn't a scary novel about demons though it is technically about an invasion of demons that transfigures the world — it's really a novel about how people are demonically selfish, and whatever way it was marketed, it was intended to speak to everyone. I think of *The Other End* as a crossover novel, a kind of allegory about social values and consciousness, in the tradition of Huxley or Wylie.

WT: But it takes on the "fundamentalist" view of the Apocalypse. So, are you just being outrageous with *The Other End?* Just needling Biblical literalists?

JS: *The Other End* is a kind of chance for psychological refreshment, a way to take a deep, long breath, and look at the world freshly. It's an "alternative Judgment Day" novel, needed because Biblical literalists were staking out great sections of the consensus mind with their twisted mis-interpretations of Biblical texts, their foolish literalism. I'm inspired by spirituality and even by some doctrinaire Christians, like C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, but I'm strongly against any kind of scriptural literalism, in any religious context. *The Other End's* Judgment Day does not involve any conventional notion of God.

Recently I heard [religion writer] Karen Armstrong say that most people get their religious ideas at the same time as they learn about Santa Claus — they grow out of believing in Santa Claus but retain childish ideas of God. I provide an alternative phenomenology, an alternative metaphysics in *The Other End,* and also I provide the joy of seeing real justice overtake the world at last. This is no horror novel, though there are dark, horrific elements in some of it — this is a novel about "the wrong things being made right" as the line was in *The Crow,* but on a global scale, and. not with violence — I don't want to give away how it's done. It's different. There is an apocalyptic factor — "apocalypse" originally meant a great "disclosure" — a revealing. That is, a shocking new way of seeing ... I believe that this book will lift people's hearts. Especially those who are sick of the right wing enforcing its neurotic ideas of ultimate values, imposing its vision of the future of the world . . .

WT: Isn't this a little risky? I don't think Pat Robertson declares "fatwas," but some of these people are pretty powerful and they are absolutely certain that they alone possess the truth.

JS: They are actually in the minority. They're a vocal minority who seized power through dirty tricks. Most people are more rational. I'm counting on the rational majority.

WT: You've said you are incapable of writing without social commentary. You've also said you are basically an entertainer. Can the two co-exist?

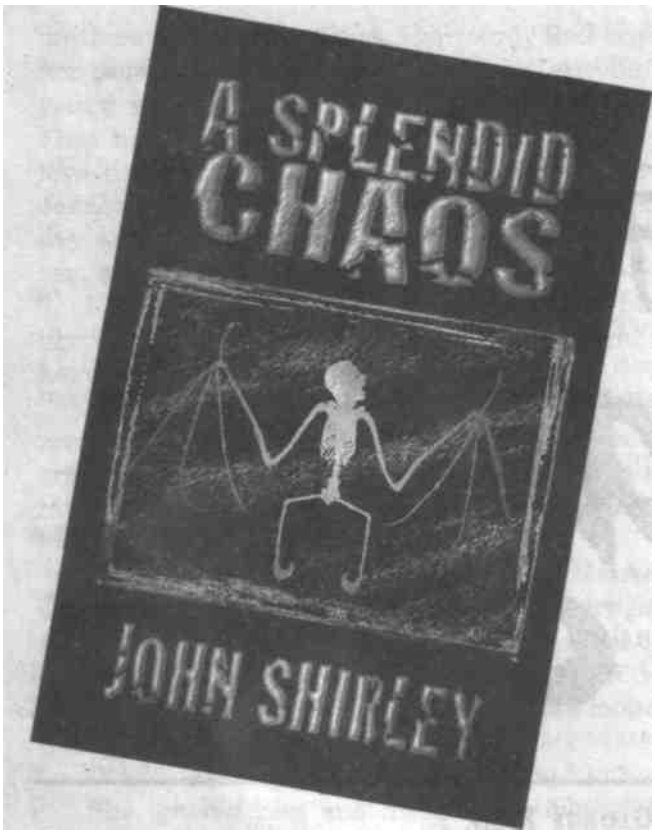
JS: I'm not incapable of writing without social commentary — I do it sometimes — think I said that it emerges from much of my writing because it's natural to me, and I let it emerge because it's called for, and because one can write entertainingly and have something to say. Were not Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* entertaining? It's possible to make a statement without being too heavy handed and irritating about it; one can fuse it so much with story you almost don't notice it while you're taking the story in, but the message gets across somehow. I enjoy entertaining; I get pleasure from it; I never stray from it knowingly.

WT: I understand *Demons* may become a movie?

JS: *Demons* has been optioned by the Weinstein brothers (formerly heads of Miramax), for their new company, The Weinstein Company. An enthusiastic, talented young director was attached last I looked and they paid well for the option so I think they're "serious."

WT: Infrapress has re-published two of your early horror novels — *In Darkness Waiting* last year and, recently, *Cellars. In Darkness Waiting* has been optioned, too.

JS: *In Darkness Waiting* is at Gold Circle *(My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *White Noise)* and there is a script that seems pretty strong . . . well see. There is now interest in my novel *Cellars* and my film agent is asking to see *The Other End.* Also my script Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia* (set in modern times) is close to being financed. It's produced by Jeff Most who did *The Crow.* But nothing is ever certain with films until they are showing in your hometown multiplex — and even then you can't be sure.



WT: Babbage Books released new editions of your cyberpunk Eclipse trilogy and a few years ago and, earlier this year, *A Splendid Chaos.* The Eclipse books are gritty, realistic future scenario sf, but *Chaos* is . . . uh . . . not. It's not fantasy, but it is certainly fantastic . . .

JS: *A Splendid Chaos* is an interplanetary fantasy; it was an influence on various people — China Mieville gave it a nice quote recently ["... a revel of delirious, intoxicating, popular surrealism"], he'd read it early on — and I've re-edited this new edition, if I may say so myself, to something closer to perfection. It evokes crystalline-sharp tableaus of some of the most surreal scenes ever appearing in a science-fiction context. It was an attempt to do the impossible, the contradictory: to write logical surrealism. I wanted the reader to see moving paintings in their minds, to see the strangest movie they'd ever seen, in their minds' eyes, while reading the book. I think it is one of the best, most original things I've written . . .

WT: But there's a fantasy project you've been rumored to be thinking about that doesn't sound like "John Shirley" at all.

JS: That would be *Northmen,* probably. It's set in a parallel universe, an Earth that is familiar and unfamiliar, and follows the story of a young "Viking." ("Viking" is, of course, not the correct term, but that conveys the idea here.) Since it is set in an alternative world, the "Viking culture" is similar but not exactly the same. The young man is adopted by a "higher" or more decadent culture in the south, and tries to stop a war between these two civilizations — I deliberately set out to have a Robert E. Howard-type character "invade" the world of high fantasy. It's a deliberate clash — and merging — of two kinds of fantasy . . . and it's something I always wanted to do. I can see the scenes playing in my mind.

WT: You have had a parallel career to writing: music. We've touched on it a bit. Are you still doing music? Still doing lyrics for BOC?

JS: Music's probably part of my writing, too. William Gibson said he always thought of my writing that he could "hear the guitars" in my writing. I think it's because I listen to music while writing — I try to evoke that energy in the prose. I was listening to Wolfmother while writing "Buried in the Sky" for example.

I try to give up writing songs and can't ever quite manage to. Blue Oyster Cult has a sheaf of lyrics by me and if they have a new album, which is unknown at this point (they need to be produced by someone like James Hetfield, the lead guitar/singer of Metallica, someone who will acknowledge how much they influenced him), they will probably use some by me. I do have plans to record new material and am thinking of putting together a band to be called The Screamin' Geezers. The demographic is there! The older rockers will take back the stages . . . with their "axes" in hand!

WT: Somehow, that seems like the right note to end upon.

Paula Guran is the editor of fantasy imprint Juno Books (www.juno-books.com). She reviews regularly for Publishers Weekly, *is review editor for* Fantasy Magazine, *and is a columnist for* Cemetery Dance. *In an earlier life she produced weekly email newsletter* DarkEcho *(www.darkecho.com) and edited* Horror Garage, *winning several IHG and Stoker Awards. She's a publisher (Infrapress, www.infrapress.com), teaches, and is author John Shirley's (wwwjohn-shirley.com) literary agent.*

In W*hich a Virgin Comes to the Perhaps Obvious Conclusion that Being Sacrificed is Not Fun*

In a certain kingdom, very young women — still girls — commonly had babies. It proved they were not virgins, and so their names would not go into the lottery that was held every year to choose a sacrifice for the dragon. Jeannette had asked her mother once why only girls were made to be sacrifices, why her brothers had not faced the lottery.

Her mother, who had been quite young when she bore Jeannette and was still fresh-faced, smiled sadly. "The dragon would probably take a boy virgin as well as a girl. But there's no way to tell with boys, and the priests won't take a chance of making a mistake." "That isn't fair."

"No, it isn't," her mother said. "But women go through childbirth while the men sit back happy as you please, and that isn't fair either."

The year came when soldiers rode to Jeanette's family's holding. Their captain announced that from the sea to the mountains, Jeanette was the only woman over the age of ten known to be a virgin. Only one possible name could be drawn in the lottery.

Jeanette's mother sobbed, and the soldiers had to tie her father to keep him from doing violence. They held her three brothers off with crossbows. Her family had urged her time and again to marry someone, anyone, a young whelp, an old widower on his deathbed. They had even begged her to find a likely boy to love her for a night and give her a child. But Jeanette had refused, because she knew that this day would come, that one day she would be chosen, and she knew her destiny.

Before the soldiers led her away, Jeanette held her mother's face in her hands. "It's all right. I have a plan, I know what to do."

She kissed her mother's cheeks, smoothed away the tears, smiled at her father and her brothers, and rode away, seated behind the captain on his horse. She smuggled with her a homemade lock-pick and a dagger.

Jeanette sat by the fire, wrapped in a blanket, eating the bread and dried meat the soldiers had given her. One of the soldiers sat a little ways off, cleaning the sweat from girths and saddles. He watched her with a gaze that burned like molten iron in the firelight.

"You're a pretty girl. I could help you."

She ignored him and his hands rubbing the leather with a soiled cloth. She stared at the fire, but felt his gaze on her, heavy, like a calloused fist.

The captain walked past and cuffed the soldier's head. "Keep your eyes on your work."

The captain sat between him and Jeanette to finish his own meal. She suspected his job was to protect her, to ensure she reached her destination safely and intact, as much as it was to take her prisoner and ensure she fulfilled her obligation.

"Perhaps this is best for her. She can't be normal, a virgin at her age."

Whispering and staring, hundreds lined the road where Jeannette walked, flanked by guards and led by priests. The people believed in destiny as Jeanette did, but the one they believed was different. They looked on her with curiosity and pity.

The procession was something out of a story, happening just the way the stories had told it for generations. Beautiful, in a way. Garbed in white, white flowers woven in her dark hair, she looked ahead, at the back of the brown cloak of the priest who walked in front of her, and tried to be calm. She'd had her chance to avoid this. She could have accepted the soldier's offer, let him lead her into the dark and raise her skirt for him. The captain and priests might have punished her, but she probably wouldn't have died. She'd have been sent home in disgrace, perhaps. But alive.

She had known this day would come. She had looked forward to it, because she had a plan. It was all right. It was going to be all right.

"The girls usually cry."

"She doesn't even look frightened. It isn't natural."

The dragon lived in a corner of the arid plain in the northern part of the kingdom. Dry brush sprouted on the dusty land, which became more rocky the farther north one traveled on the narrow road. Ravines cut across the plains, crumbling spires of granite rose from windswept outcrop-pings, and ridges held caves and channels that delved into the earth.

A path led from the road to one of these caves. The mouth of the cave was a dark slit in the rock, a depthless shadow, empty and featureless even in the midday sun. Outside the cave, a platform of rock stood exposed. A tall iron pole had been driven into the granite. A cold wind rattled a set of chains dangling from the pole. Jeanette brushed a strand of hair from her face.

The priests led her to the pole. The soldiers stood near, guarding her in case she panicked and tried to run, as some girls had done in other years, or so Jeanette had heard. Four manacles dangled from chains, two at the base of the pole and two in the middle. The master of the priests guided her to the pole and fastened the bindings himself, one on each wrist, one on each ankle.

The priests recited a blessing, a plea, begging their nemesis to accept the offering, to keep the peace for another year. They lauded the value of virgins, who were most pure. Jeanette knew the truth, though, that no one prized virgins. If virginity were valuable as anything other than a bribe for dragons, why did all the girls want to lose it so quickly?

She wondered how one small virgin could satisfy a dragon for a whole year.

"Go to your fate in peace, child."

The master priest was an old man who had sent dozens of girls on this final journey, had probably given them all this final command.

"I'll be fine," she told the priest, keeping any tremor out of her voice.

The priest met her gaze suddenly, like he hadn't meant to. He'd kept his face downcast until that moment. Now he looked at her with a watery, wavering gaze. Jeanette smiled, and he quickly turned away.

The priests and soldiers departed, and the crowd that had come to watch followed them quickly, before the dragon appeared. Jeanette was left alone, tied hand and foot to a post at the mouth of the cave, to await her fate.

She didn't know how much time she had before the dragon emerged from the cave. She waited until the procession had gone away and she couldn't hear them anymore, so no one could stop her. She hoped she had time. She only needed a few moments.

The chains weren't meant to restrict her movement, only to keep her from leaving. She was lucky in that. By leaning down and reaching up, she retrieved the lock-pick she'd woven among the flowers in her hair.

She had been afraid the priests would find her tools and take them away. She'd kept them hidden among her clothes while she changed into the ceremonial gown and a priestess washed and braided her

hair. Her guardians turned their backs for a moment, and she slipped the pick into her hair and tied the dagger to her leg. They didn't expect such behavior from a pure young girl, so they weren't looking for rebellion.

For months, she'd practiced picking locks. She had practiced with all sorts of variations: hands chained above her head, behind her back, on many different kinds of locks, by feel, with her eyes closed, and she'd practiced for speed.

These shackles were difficult because they were stiff with rust and grime.

Stay calm. She kept her breathing steady. Even so, she let out a sigh when the first shackle around her wrist snapped open.

This was taking too long. She hadn't yet heard a dragon's roar or the crunch of massive footfalls on the rocky ground. She didn't know what she would hear first. The beast must have been near.

Working methodically, keeping her hands steady — she dared not drop the pick — she finally sprang the second lock. She crouched and started work on the bindings around her ankles.

That was when she heard the scrape of claws against stone, felt the ground tremble as some monstrous beast stepped closer. A few pebbles tumbled from the hill above her.

The grime caked into the keyholes and cracks of the shackles was old blood, of course.

The dragon seemed to take forever to climb from its den, along the passage to the mouth of the cave. Jeanette fumbled, cut her hand and dropped the pick. Drawing a sharp breath, she found it and tried again. The scraping footsteps crept closer.

Finally the last shackle snapped open, and with a yelp she clawed it away and sprang from the pole. She climbed the rocks, scrambling to get above the cave entrance. She found a sheltered perch behind a jagged boulder.

It wasn't enough just to escape. Without its sacrifice, the dragon would break the peace and ravage the countryside. Another girl would be brought here, and the sacrifices would continue. Jeanette had to find a way to destroy the dragon.

She retrieved her dagger. It was a fool's hope. Perhaps she'd be lucky.

At last the dragon slipped out of the cave and into the light.

It raised itself on a boulder and looked around, snout lifted to the air, nostrils flaring. It was perhaps twice the size of a horse, broad of back, with a long, writhing neck and sinewy limbs.

It was also thin. Its ribs showed above a hollow belly. Its scales were brown, dull. Many were missing; scattered spots of flaking pink skin showed along its length. Its yellow eyes squinted. It pulled back its lips to reveal broken teeth.

When it turned to make a circuit of its realm, it limped, one of its forelegs stumbling under its weight. It stepped, slumped, picked itself up and lurched forward again, making agonizing progress over the rocks. Tattered membranes hung between its forelegs and body, the remnants of wings.

The dragon was old, its skin cracked, its scales stained, its body wasted. It might once have been a terror, but not for many years. It might once have flown over the countryside, devouring every living thing in its path. Now, it might be able to do battle with a young girl. But only if she were tied to a post.

This dragon couldn't ravage the countryside. A few men on horseback with spears — the soldiers who had brought her from her family's farm, for instance — could put it out of its misery. Jeanette wondered when was the last time anyone had seen the dragon, or if the priests and soldiers had simply been abandoning the girls to the rocks without a backward glance all these years.

The task before her became much less difficult, though she almost felt sorry for the beast.

If she did nothing, it would probably starve. It looked as if it was barely surviving on its one virgin a year. But if she wanted to return home and ensure that no other girls were bound here and left to die, she had to do more. She couldn't leave the beast alone.

It hadn't seen her yet. It was sniffing around the rocks, searching slowly and carefully. Perhaps it couldn't see at all.

Still crouched on an outcropping above it, she inched toward the edge, gripping her knife, preparing herself. It was just a creature, after all, though it may have lived a thousand years and devoured a million men.

She had hunted rabbits and helped slaughter pigs. She knew how to kill beasts. She could not be afraid.

She jumped.

Landing on the dragon's back, she sprawled and almost slipped, tumbling off the animal. Desperate, she scraped her hands against the scales, hoping to reach a handhold. She found a grip on the ridged spine with one hand while supporting herself with the knuckles of the hand that held the knife, which she couldn't drop or she was lost. A living heat rose off the creature, smelling of peat and dying embers.

The dragon shrieked, a choking, wheezing sound. Not so much as a puff of smoke emerged from its mouth. At least Jeanette didn't have to worry about fire. The beast lurched, but not very quickly. She kept hold of her perch. She could imagine the dragon at the peak of its strength, its great body pulsing with power, flinging itself one way and another in the blink of an eye, its fierce head whipping around to snap at her with daggerlike fangs.

But its head turned slowly on a neck stiff with age. It hissed, and its chest heaved with labored breathing.

It was almost dead already.

Gripping the ridges where its backbone protruded, she crawled up its back, then up its neck, which collapsed under her weight, smashing against the rock. The dragon squealed, snapping uselessly as it tried to reach back for her. The tail lashed against the rock, knocking loose pebbles which clattered around them.

Slumped on its neck, pinning it to the ground, she reached over its head. Its body rolled as it tried to free itself, and the joints along its spine cracked.

She placed her hand between the curled spines that grew out the back of its head, and balancing herself, she drove her knife into its right eye, using her body to force the weapon as far as it would go, until her shoulder rested on the bone of the socket, and the knife lodged deep in its brain.

The dragon shuddered, its death rippling along its entire body. Jeanette held on tightly, closing her eyes and hoping it would end soon.

She lay stretched along the dragon's neck, her head pillowed on its brow, her arm resting in the wetness of the burst eye socket. The blood was growing cold and thick. It smelled sweet and rotten, much worse than slaughtered pigs. The bones along its neck dug through the fabric of her gown, making an uncomfortable bed.

She scraped the brain and gore off her arm as well as she could, wiping her hands on the hem of her gown. The silky fabric wasn't much use for that.

She could go home. Though if she wanted them to believe that the dragon was dead, she had to bring back proof. She'd show the priests, and they wouldn't hold any more lotteries.

She couldn't carry back the head, as impressive as it would be to see it hanging on a wall. In the end, she cut off a toe and its claw, unmistakably the black, curved claw of a dragon. Once it might have been as sharp as a sword, but now it was dull with age. She left the dragon sprawled among the heaps of stone. Within half an hour of walking, she looked back, and the dragon's body was only another shadow among the crevices.

A flock of ravens circled overhead.

One would think, having slain a dragon, she could face anything.

She did not find shelter by nightfall, so she lay down in a sandy depression on the lee side of a boulder, hugged herself, and tried to sleep. She also had not found any water, and her throat was swollen, her mouth sticky. Her gown and skin were grimy, itchy.

The desert was painfully cold at night, even in summer. Too cold to let her sleep. She clutched the dragon's claw and longed for morning, for light. She had killed a dragon, she had the proof here in her hands. She would not let the night kill her.

She'd held the claw for so long, so tightly, that it was warm to the touch. Hot, even. As if it still had life, despite the scabbed stump. The toe still had muscles, it still flexed. It hadn't stiffened in death.

It gave her warmth, a small and odd companion in the lonely darkness.

They will not thank you for killing me.

The voice came as a whisper, like wind through desert scrub.

She must have fallen asleep; her mind was thick with dreaming, and she couldn't open her eyes. She imagined that she held the dragon in her hands, she held its life in her hands.

They will fear and curse you.

"No, they won't. They will thank me. I've saved them."

You have destroyed a tradition that has lasted for centuries. But I must thank you. Dragons cannot die, they can only be killed. I waited a long time.

"You could have been killed anytime, you could have found a warrior anywhere and let him kill you."

Its chuckle rumbled through the earth. *Don't you think I tried that?*

Jeannette curled tighter to herself, shivering, and whimpering.

Hush there. You're probably right. They'll cheer for you and throw flowers in your path, and you'll be safe. Sleep now. Don't be afraid.

She nestled into what felt like the warm embrace of a friend and fell asleep.

On the second day she found a pool and slow-running stream, enough water to wash and to keep herself from dying of thirst.

On the third day, disheveled and exhausted, she arrived at the door of the abbey at the first town beyond the northern waste, where she had been washed and dressed for the sacrifice.

People stared at her as she passed by. Her white gown, no matter how stained and tattered, made clear who she was, or who she was supposed to be — the sacrifice to the dragon. By the time she reached the abbey, a crowd had gathered to watch what the priests would say about her return.

She pulled the chain at the door of the abbey. It opened, and the priest who appeared there looked at her, eyes wide.

"I killed the dragon," she said and showed him the claw.

Stammering, he called back into the abbey. Jeanette stayed at the door, unsure of what would happen, of what she expected to happen when she came here. She thought they would be happy. The crowd remained, whispering among themselves and hemming her in.

The dragon's claw, as long as her forearm, lay in her hands, still warm, as if it were still attached to the dragon's foot and ready to spring to life. The scales were dull. She ran her finger along the claw. It was smooth, hard as iron.

She wanted to go home.

The priest returned with several of his fellows. They grabbed her, surrounded her, pulled her inside, shut the door behind her. It happened quickly, and they did not seem surprised, or glad, or impressed that she had returned. Instead, they seemed worried, which made her afraid.

In moments, they'd brought her to the room where she'd been prepared as a sacrifice, a bare stone antechamber with a fireplace and washbasin, where a week ago she had been cleaned and anointed. She stood in the middle of the room, a ring of priests surrounding her. The master priest stood before her.

"What have you done?" he said.

"I killed the dragon." She cradled the claw to her chest.

"Why have you done this?" Horror filled his voice. Inexplicable horror. Was there something about the dragon Jeanette didn't know?

They will not thank you.

"I didn't want to die. I thought — I believed I could do this thing." She hoped she might, eventually, by chance, say the thing that would make this right. "It was old, crippled. Anyone could have done it. I picked the locks on the shackles. I planned it. I — I didn't understand why no one had done it before. Someone should have killed it a long time ago."

Harshly, the priest said, "Whether or not the dragon could be killed, whether or not it should have been killed, is not important. The sacrifice is important. The sacrifice is why you were chosen, why the choice is made every year."

Very quietly she said, "I don't understand."

"Fear," the old priest said, his voice shaking. "We sacrifice so that we will not have to fear. Without the dragon, how will we banish our fear? What we will sacrifice, so that we do not have to be afraid?"

"Nothing," Jeanette said without thinking. "We can choose not to fear."

One of the other priests said, "How does a girl kill a dragon?"

"It isn't natural," said another.

"It isn't possible."

"Not without suspicion."

"Suspicion of witchcraft."

Jeanette looked around as the priests talked. She began to understand, and began to fear in a way she hadn't when she faced the dragon.

"We cannot tolerate a witch among us."

The old priest stepped toward her, the circle closed around her, and she had a vision of herself bound to another post, with knotted rope she couldn't escape from, and flames climbing around her, which she couldn't kill. They had found a new fear to make a sacrifice to; something else to kill, to comfort themselves.

The dragon's claw was dull, worn by age and use. But it still had a point on it, and this was the hand she had used to kill a dragon.

Don't be afraid. Some hunters believe they take the power of the creatures they kill. You have killed me. My power is yours.

Jeanette slashed the claw at the old priest, as the dragon might have slashed in its younger days. He fell back, and the priests shouted in panic. Half of them reached to help their master, half lunged to stop Jeanette.

She was young and quick and escaped them all, running out of the room. She didn't know if the crowd would still be gathered at the front door, so she escaped to the back of the building and found another door, another way out.

She couldn't go home; the priests would send soldiers after her. Instead, she traveled far away, to a desert land where a dragon might live.

There was a kingdom that held a lottery every year, to choose a virgin who would be sacrificed to the witch who lived in a cave at the edge of the northern desert. She was so powerful, it was said, that she knew the ancient language of dragons, which had not been spoken on earth in centuries.

The girls were chained to a rock near her cave and left to their fates. The witch used their pure white bones in her spells, and fed on their untainted flesh, to preserve and restore her own rotten body.

One year, the girl who was left on the rock had only just begun to grow the first curve of breast and to dream of dancing at the country fair. Now that the priests were gone and could no longer intimidate her to silence, she cried and struggled against the chains until her wrists bled.

When the witch appeared at the mouth of the cave, the girl screamed and thrashed like a wild thing, stupid with fear.

The witch was an old, old woman, with gray hair tied in a braid draped over her shoulder, coiled and tucked into her belt. She walked stooped, leaning on a cane of knobbed wood. And it was true what the stories said, that she had bound a dragon's claw, curved and polished black, to the head of the staff. She held a key in her hand.

"Hush, child, hush. I am too old to fight you."

Her voice was old and kind, like a grandmother's voice, which made the girl fall still and silent.

"There, that's a good girl," the witch said.

One by one, the witch unfastened the shackles with her key. The girl started trembling so hard her teeth chattered.

When she was free, the witch took her hand and helped her to her feet. Then she unfolded the cloak she'd held draped over one arm and put it around the girl's shoulders. "You can't travel in that flimsy gown they gave you, can you? And here."

The witch put a pouch filled with coins into the girl's hand.

Holding her other hand, the witch led her to the far side of the hill, opposite the mouth of her cave. She pointed to a path that led down the hill and away, far into the distance.

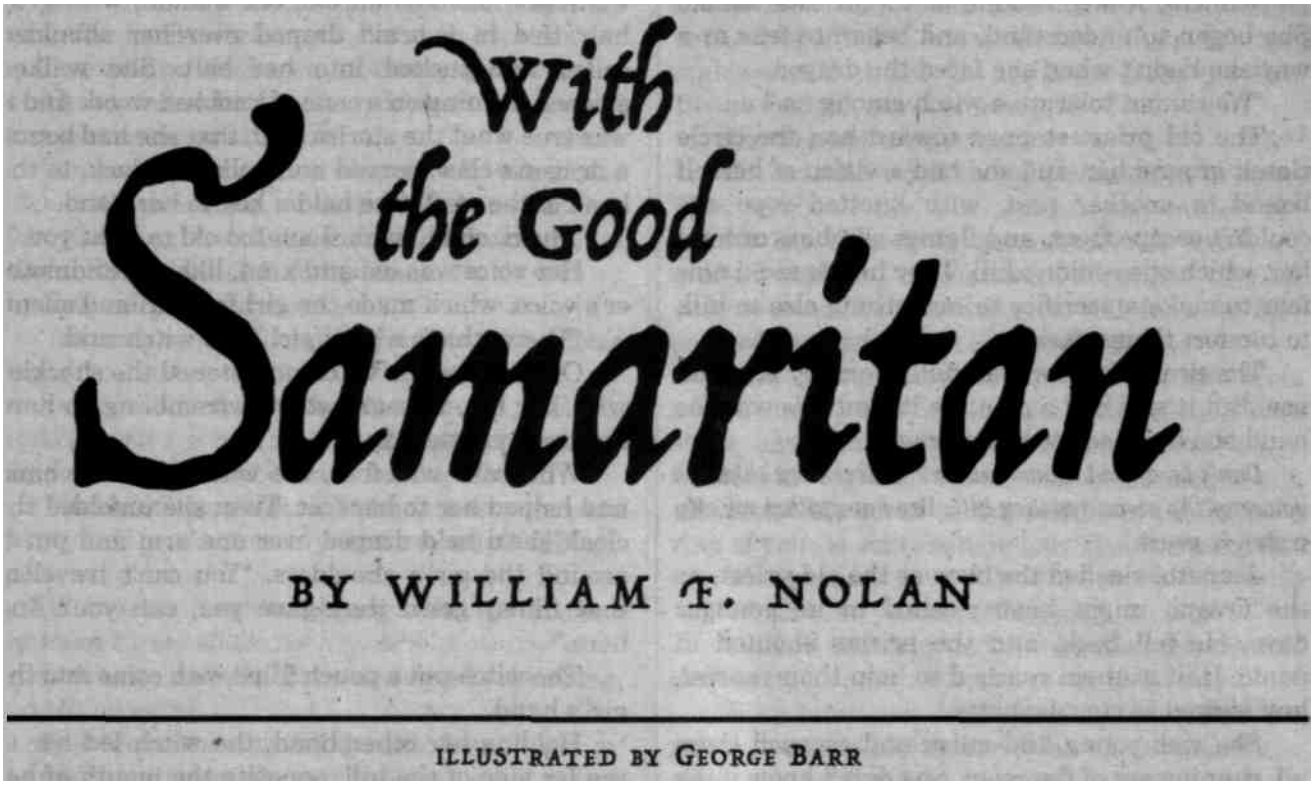
She said, "Take this path. In a day it will bring you to a country where girls are not sacrificed to anything. The family at the first farm will help you. Go now, and don't be afraid."

The girl stared at the witch a long time, deciding whether or not to be afraid, wondering if she should dare to believe that she would live. The witch smiled a grandmother's smile.

Impulsively, the girl hugged her, arms around
the witch's shoulders, gently because the woman seemed frail. Then she drew away and ran down

the path, clutching the cloak around her.

Carrie Vaughn is the author of Kitty and the Midnight Hour *and* Kitty Goes to Washington, *as well as numerous short stories. Though she writes about werewolves, the only monster she has at home is a 15-pound miniature American Eskimo dog named Lily. She has an M.A. in English Literature, is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop, and lives in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at* www.carrievaughn.com.



In Which a Dangerous Man and a Harmless Man Chance to Meet Upon the Road

*B*racker was telling me things about himself that I didn't care to know. "I've spent half my life in jail," he said. "Did time from when I was just a kid. I'm thirty, and been fifteen years in the slammer. You ever been inside?"

I shook my head.

"Hell, jail ain't no hassle for me." He grinned, but there was no warmth in it. His eyes were obsidian, dark and glassy, without visible pupils. "I don't mind doing time. Even kinda like it. No temptations is what I mean. No booze. No broads. No poker." He glanced at me. "You play poker?"

"Afraid not," I said. "I don't know much about cards."

"Me, I play poker," Bracker declared, violently twisting the wheel to miss a pothole in the street. It was early December, and we'd had snow the week before. The sun had melted most of it, leaving piles of ugly brown slush along the curbs.

Bracker was unshaven, with a ragged growth of beard and two teeth missing in his lower jaw. The rest were badly discolored. A faint, unpleasant odor emanated from his armpits.

We were in his '66 Dodge Dart, paint-flaked and rusting. A large dent scarred the door on the passenger side, and the trunk lid was tied down with a twist of rope.

"Hell, I'm just plain unlucky at poker. In Vegas, they got these poker machines. I dropped a hundred a day in 'em for six days straight. Seems like I always lose."

"Then why do you go on playing?" I asked him. We were on the way to my apartment, and I was anxious to get there. Being with Bracker was nerve-wracking. We lived in different worlds.

"I play poker because I *like* playing poker," he said.

"You're obviously addicted," I told him.

He glared at me. "You're full of it! I ain't addicted to shit! I can quit poker same way I can quit booze if I damn well feel like it. Same as I gave up smokes. I got willpower that way."

"Okay," I said. I didn't want to argue with him. You don't argue with a man like Bracker.

"You wanna know my first name?" he asked, grinning again.

"All right," I said. I really didn't want to know his first name; all I wanted was to get back to my apartment.

"It's Kingsley," he said. "After Norman Miller, that war writer guy."

"You mean Norman Mailer — the man who wrote *The Naked and the Dead?"*

"Yeah, him," said Bracker. "His middle name is Kingsley. Norman Kingsley Mailer. My Ma, she thought that middle name was real fancy, so she saddled me with it. Kingsley Bracker. Fancy, eh?"

I nodded.

"Well, I purely hate the goddamn name," he said, his tone hard-edged. "Had a smartass son of a bitch in the slammer call me Kingsley, an' I made me a shiv out'a butter knife and stuck him good. Didn't kill the bastard, but he spent a month in medical."

"What did they do to you?"

"I claimed it was self-defense, that he came at me with the shiv and we wrestled some and the shiv ended up in him. They bought my story, an' he got all the blame." He looked at me. "You ever stick anybody?"

"You mean have I ever used a knife on someone?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

"No, never. I'm not the violent type."

"You sayin' I am?" His tone was hard again.

"Oh, no, not at all. I was just answering your question."

We were now only four blocks from my apartment. Off Greenwood, down 27th to Forum, then straight into the unit. "Turn left when you get to Forum Drive," I said. "The apartment complex is just behind Safeway."

"You shop at Safeway?" Bracker asked.

"Sometimes. Not always."

"They got them little red plastic Safeway cards. Save a bundle with them cards. You got one?"

"Yes, I have a club card."

"Bet you save a bundle, huh?"

"It adds up," I said.

"Damn! If I lived here in Bend like you do, I'd have me one a' them little red plastic cards."

"Where *do* you live?"

"Wherever the road takes me. I just keep movin'. A rollin' stone, that's me."

After an awkward silence, I said, "Just want you to know how much I appreciate your helping me out this way."

Bracker shrugged. "Gella stuck outta town with a busted wheel, least I can do is give him a lift."

"It was very kind of you." I smiled at him.

"Yeah, that's me, Kindly Kingsley." He chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. "I"m like one a' them ginks from the Bible. Know what I mean?"

"A Good Samaritan," I said.

"That's it. Got me a heart as big as all outdoors. You read the Bible?"

"As a child," I said.

"Ma, she plain loved her Bible. Useta quote from it at suppertime. Called me a 'stained lamb.' Said I'd never amount ta nothin'." Another chuckle. "She was dead right about that!"

"I'll have a tow truck take my car into the garage," I said. "I think it's a broken front axle. Metal fatigue."

"Some cars'll do that," said Bracker, "specially them dinky little foreign suckers. What's yours called?"

"An MG-TC," I said. "Wire wheels. Original leather and paint. A classic."

He snorted. "A classic piecea shit, I'd say! Hell, this here Dodge a'mine, it'd never break no axle. Built like a goddamn tank!"

"You're fortunate," I said.

"Ya oughtta dump that freakin' little buggy a'yours and get yerself a Dodge Dart. I found this baby in Cincinnatti. Ever been to Cincinnatti?"

"Regrettably, I have not. Afraid I'm something of a homebody."

"Where you from?" he asked.

"California, originally. I'm a native of Los Angeles. I moved here to Oregon after . . ." My voice faltered.

"After what?"

"After the death of my wife and children. A boy and a girl."

"How'd they kick off?"

"I. . . I'd rather not talk about it," I told him.

"Kinda painful, huh?"

"Yes . . . painful." I drew in a long breath. "I think a lot about Claire and the children."

"Me, I never been hitched," said Bracker. "Don't need no broad tellin' me what to do — tyin' me down. No ball and chain for me! Wham, bam, thank you ma'am. That's my style. And I never wanted no kids."

"They can be a trial," I admitted.

More silence. Then ...

"You'd probably like to know what put me in the slammer," said Kingsley Bracker.

I shook my head. "It's none of my business."

"It was a girl. Name a' Cindy. One wild bitch, man, she was! Cindy liked rough sex, so I got rough with her — and she ended up dead."

I drew in a breath, without response. A block more to go, then I'd be home.

"Hell, Cindy asked for it," said Bracker. "She wanted it rough, so I played along. It was all her idea."

He seemed to be waiting for my reaction. "Uh-huh, I can see how something like that could get out of hand."

"Shit, I ain't no woman killer," said Bracker. "Lawyer got it reduced to manslaughter, so I done my time an' now I'm free as a friggin' bird."

"You paid your debt to society," I said.

"That's it." He chuckled again. "Paid in full."

A silence.

"I like to drink," said Bracker. "You drink?"

"On occasion," I said.

"Me, I like my booze. Partial to Scotch whiskey. They took away my driver's license after I slammed inta the back of a laundry truck. I was swacked. Drunk as a hoot owl. Can't even remember the accident."

"Liquor will do that," I said.

"Judge suspended my license an' impounded my car. Chevy Impala. But I went right out an' bought me this here Dodge. Got it for a song."

"Then, currently . . . you're driving without a license?"

"Sure I am. No fat-assed judge is gonna keep me grounded."

"What if you're stopped for a traffic violation?"

"I won't be." He winked at me. "I'm real careful."

"Do you still drink and drive?"

"Hell, yes. But I can handle the booze. I won't be hitting no more laundry trucks, that's for damn sure."

I nodded.

"My daddy liked his booze, same as me," said Bracker. "We useta get skunkin' drunk together. That was after Ma kicked off. Pop got lonely. Replaced her with a bottle. Hell, I was drunk before I was seven. Whoooooeee! A six-year-old drunk. Oh, we had us some *times,* me an' Pop."

"You've led a colorful life," I said.

"Yeah, colorful, that's me." He looked over. "You bein' here in Bend and all, you fish an' hunt?"

"I'm not the sports type," I admitted. "But I do like to be out on the water. I'm a Pisces. The water sign. But I don't fish. Let them be, I say. Why put a steel hook in their throats?"

"Cuz fish is good eatin', that's why," said Bracker. "Me, if I lived here, I'd be out catchin' me some fish an' killin' some game. I'm a fair-to-mid-dlin' shot."

"I've never used firearms," I said.

"You're a case, you are," Bracker declared. "What *do* you do?"

"Not much. I read. See European films. Play music."

"Jeez, what a drag!" said Bracker, pulling the Dodge to the curb.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked.

He cut the engine, turning to me with his cold grin. Bracker drew a small black automatic from his coat. "I'll need your wallet," he said.

"What?"

"I happen to be a little short'a cash, an' I fig-ger you must carry plenty, dressed all slick the way you are, and with that nifty little sporty car you drive." His tone was ice. "So gimme your wallet."

"You're . . . robbing me?"

"Call it a loan." Again the dry chuckle. "To a Good Samaritan." He brought up the gun, holding it rocksteady in his right hand. I noticed that his nails were ragged, caked with grime.

I looked down at the gun. "I can phone the police," I said, "and have you arrested."

"Naw, ya wouldn't wanta do that," he said. His black eyes glittered, and his voice was metallic. "If you did, I'd come back and mess you up real good."

"You'd be in jail."

"Not forever, I wouldn't. And when I got out, I'd come see you."

"Are you threatening my life?"

"I'm just tellin' you straight. You sic the law onta me and you take the consequences."

"I'm not afraid of a gun," I told him.

"Well, ya damn well *better* be!" he snapped. "Don't hand over your wallet, I'll blow a fuggin' hole right through you!"

With snakelike speed, before he could react, I clamped my fingers around his right wrist, crushing the bone. He let out a sharp cry of pain, and the automatic dropped from his now-nerveless hand. I relaxed my grip on his wrist and smiled at him.

"That's better," I said.

He flinched back in the seat, staring at me. "Who the hell *are* you?"

"Not *who,"* I replied. *"What."*

"I don't —" He fumbled for words.

"You have made me angry," I told him. "I would have left you alone, but you have made me angry with your clumsy attempt at robbery."

He was holding his shattered wrist with his left hand, breathing heavily. Blood seeped between his fingers.

"Look, mister," he began. "I never meant to —"

I smashed a fist into his face, breaking his cheekbone. He cried out in agony as I picked up the fallen

automatic.

"Don't," he pleaded. "Don't shoot, mister. Christ knows I never meant to —"

"I don't intend to shoot you," I told him.

"It was a joke . . . about my wanting your money."

"You have a strange sense of humor," I said, holding the gun loosely. I applied pressure, and the metal twisted like black taffy. I tossed it out the car window.

Bracker was staring at me, eyes wide.

"We possess great strength," I said quietly.

"We?"

"My kind. Oh, there's much that has been written and said of us that is not true. That we cower before a cross . . . that we sleep in coffins . . . that we fear sunlight. All nonsense. But we *do* possess great strength."

Bracker snatched at the door handle, hoping to escape from the car, but I struck him again, a chopping blow that rendered him unconscious.

Cars were passing us along the highway, but their drivers ignored us. I had plenty of time.

Bracker was slumped over the wheel. I leaned toward him, sinking my teeth into his neck.

His blood was refreshing.

As I was enjoying him, my thoughts turned to Claire and the children. Of course, when I married here, she had no idea what I was. I left her drained body in the backyard ... hers and the children's. Young blood is delicious.

I was almost finished with Bracker. His heartbeat was erratic, slowing. To a stop. I felt him die.

A great sense of fulfillment. A sense of utter peace. I drew in a long, relaxed breath.

Then I walked back to my apartment.

Kingsley Bracker, Good Samaritan, had been
unlucky at more than poker.

In Which a Bookstore Provides the Occasion for a Spelling Mistake of Unusual Kind

Space and Time Books woke at dawn, the way it always did. This August morning was cloudy, its sky turning from black to indigo to the grey-blue of a Turner painting. Though the bookstore had never stirred from Montreal's Sherbrooke Street, it knew about Turner paintings from osmosis. Each book whispered its words and radiated its pictures the same way that humans emitted heat. Sometimes the bookstore liked to hear the tomes buzzing about everything from the Sahara to sexuality, but its favourite moment every morning was the silence when the owner, John Tsui, came up to the doorstep. As soon as John turned the key and crossed the threshold, the volumes began whispering again, but the bookstore ignored them, feeling John's measured steps as he crossed to the back room to put on a pot of coffee. The rich, dark smell of coffee, the bookstore sometimes thought, was worth a thousand words.

This morning, John turned on the computer and went over the accounts. He sighed and shook his head. The bookstore took no notice; John always grunted before his first cup of coffee.

Nathalie came in soon after. She unwrapped the orange paisley scarf from her ginger curls and shook the rain from her umbrella. "Hello, my love. What is the damage?"

"Worse than I thought."

She put her arm around him as she read over his shoulder.

He brought her hand to his lips. Her burgundy nail polish harmonized nicely with the oak bookshelves around her. The bookstore hummed with happiness. It liked harmony.

"John . . ."

He shook his head. "I can't do this any more. It's not fair to you."

She laughed. "To me? What does that matter?"

His face was set. "I'm not supporting you like this. You're the one bringing in money. We can't throw it away on my store."

She linked her hand with his. "It is my money. I will throw it away any way I like. On this store. On supporting you as you write your new novel. On *pain au chocolat.* The possibilities are endless." She produced a bag from Au Pain Dore and showed him the pastries.

"Nat, it's not a joke."

She stopped smiling. "Neither is this."

He snorted. "Space and Time Books."

The bookstore halted its humming, caught by its name said in such a strange tone. It usually ignored human voices — the books said enough — but this was different. John had never said its name so flatly before. Could he be giving up just when the store had gotten properly settled?

The bookstore didn't like this at all.

"Will we still have our Hallowe'en party?" Nathalie was asking.

He sighed. "I guess. Our rent is paid until December, and I'll have to keep it open to try and sell off the stock."

Someone knocked on the door. It was a girl with black hair, red lipstick, and a boxload of books. "John? Are you open yet?"

He hesitated. Nathalie whispered, "Go on, get your customer."

"It's not a customer, it's Maggie." But he went to the door. "Hi, Maggie."

"It's Margaret now, remember?"

"Sure." He grinned a little.

She pushed a hand through her hair, which was straight and sparkling with rain. John expected some of the dye to come off, but it didn't. "I gotcha some stuff."

"I'm not really taking anything right now, uh, Margaret."

"Aw, come on." She dumped the wet box on the counter. "Nathalie? You going to back me up?"

Nathalie rose and looked through the box politely. "Okay. Well, we have Anne Rice and Guy Gavriel Kay ... we don't need any more philosophy books, or poetry, either . . . what's this? *The Book of Spells?"* She lifted out a book with a worn black leather cover. It was warmer than she'd expected, and she recoiled slightly.

"Yeah! Pretty cool, eh?"

"Mmm. I don't think we need any of these today." She looked at John.

"Sorry, Maggie."

"Margaret. All right, I'll go look around." She poked around and came back holding, of all things, a kids' book. *"Bruno and Boots!* I haven't read this in so long, it was really funny. Hey, how much?"

"Two dollars."

She stuck her tongue out. "Can I trade for *The Book of Spells?"*

John shook his head. "We're really not looking for stock."

"It's not stock, it'll change your life!"

John and Nathalie exchanged a smile. "Sorry, Mags."

"All right, geez, hard sell." She dug out an indigo wallet with a Celtic design and threw a toonie on the counter. "I guess *Bruno and Boots* are worth it. See ya, I'm gonna grab a coffee and see if anyone else wants these!"

She threw her new book in her box, along with a few freebie bookmarks and a notice for the Hallowe'en party. "Hey, cool, you never know, you know?"

"Maybe some of your Concordia friends would like to come?" John asked, knowing they wouldn't.

"Yeah, maybe. See ya!" She dashed out into the rain. The door banged shut behind her, the bells clanging. John looked at Nathalie. She brought him a cup of coffee. They clinked their mugs together, laughed and kissed, but then the bells rang again. "Hopeless to get any action here," John said.

"You're right." She gave him the eye. "When do you get off work, sailor?"

"Six o'clock."

They kissed again, quickly, before John went to help the next customer. It was a young man with another box of books. Nathalie noticed that the girl had left her spell book on the table. She wrote "Maggie " on a post-it note and pressed to the cover before dropping it in the back room for safekeeping.

THE BOOKSTORE WAS perturbed. Finally, a decent owner, a roof with new slate tiles, a mix of books with good vibrations, and now it had to come to this! Money, the root of all evil. That was a quote from one of the books, the bookstore couldn't remember which; but right now, that didn't matter. The store rounded up some business books. They loved to talk and straighten their covers importantly, but the bookstore got the gist. Small Canadian businesses were struggling with rent, taxes and other costs. Independent bookstores were closing their doors because big bookstores were getting bigger discounts, buying up first print runs only to return them, and generally not playing fair.

"What do you have to say?" he finally asked the newcomer.

The Book of Spells remained silent.

"She's not like us," a mutual-funds book said quietly, its spine shuddering. "Someone has to invoke her."

The bookstore considered, then called out, "With the powers invested in me by the books I hold and the ground on which I stand, I invoke you!"

The book was still. Then its cover opened a sliver, and dust billowed out as she spoke. "What is it you want, Space and Time Books?"

The bookstore hesitated. "A solution."

"What would that be?"

"Money, I suppose."

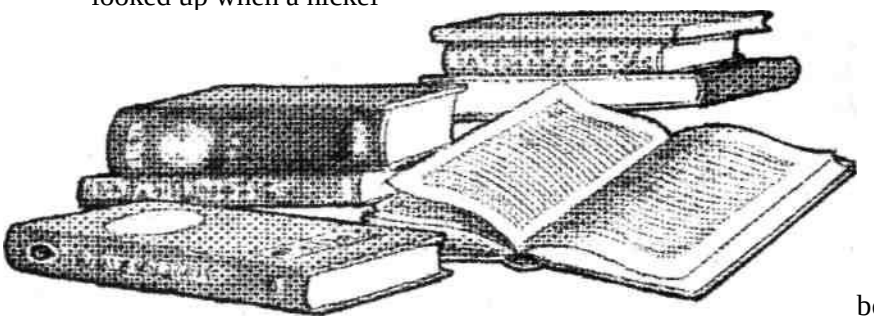
"There will be a price. First, you must think of the solution yourself. Second, you may only invoke me three times. And third, I will need to be paid."

"What's your price?"

"What's your solution?"

"Let me think about it." The bookstore went to talk to the history section.

The next morning, John was drinking coffee and trying to write. He was a third of the way through a novel about a robot mission to terraform a new planet, but the words just wouldn't come. He looked up when a nickel



bounced off the door frame and rolled inside the open door.

He stood up and saw a little girl crying outside. He gave the nickel back to her. Her mother thanked him quickly and sped off.

A young man came in with a box of books and accidentally left his wallet on the counter. John sighed, called the number in his wallet, and left a message.

An elderly woman came in with her cane.

"Can I help you, Mrs. McGarrigle?"

"No, John. I don't need any help today." She leaned in close to stage-whisper. "I won the lottery!" Her breath smelled like liquor.

"Uh, that's nice." He noticed that the fur collar she always wore was looking a bit threadbare.

"No, I mean it!" She dug in her black beaded purse. "It's right here. No, that's for Scruffy. All right, here. No . . . Ah! " She brandished a Lotto 649 ticket at him.

"Congratulations, Mrs. McGarrigle." He put on a big smile. "What are you going to do now?"

Her face crinkled. "I'm not sure."

He put his arm around her. "Well, I'm happy for you, whatever you do. Just be sure to tell me all about it afterward."

"All right." Her voice was small now. "Could I use your bathroom?"

"Of course."

When he returned two hours later, the crumpled lottery ticket lay on top of the toilet seat tank. He sighed and put it in an envelope for Mrs. McGarrigle.

"IT'S NOT WORKING."

"Well, it's not my fault." *The Book of Spells* ruffled her pages with annoyance.

The bookstore tried to be charming. "I mean, it's working nicely, but you can't just give money to John by making other people give it away, he's too honest."

"Money has to come from somewhere. It doesn't grow on trees."

"I know." The bookstore couldn't remember which book had said that, either. Oh, well.

"Do you want me to give the money to Nathalie instead?"

The bookstore hesitated. "No. How about . . . just making the store very attractive to people? So there'll be lots of customers?"

"You just want people to be attracted to you."

The bookstore rattled a few shelves in irritation. Some books yelled, and the store felt better. "Sorry, guys." It turned on the spell book. "Well, they can't just be attracted to certain books, because we want to sell them away. So why not the place that holds them?"

The Book of Spells was dubious. "I suppose I could try a love spell. I've never tried it on a building before."

Your store is be-you-tiful!" gushed a woman.

Her husband nodded and added, "Yes, quite."

"I love the sign with the outer-space motif. So eye-catching. Oh! And the oak shelves. So rare nowadays, pine everywhere, how dull."

The man gestured with his cane. "Look, he has new books at the front and used at the back. Clever."

"Did you see the overhead lighting? Fluorescent, but easy on the eyes. Marvellous."

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" John tried.

"No, no." She turned to her husband. "I adore the teeny window at the back."

"It looks into the alley, my dear."

"A little peek into another world. Charming. And, oh! Look, sweetheart, a set of stairs. You know what that means."

They chorused together, "A second floor."

John interrupted their twitters of excitement. "It's really not open to the public."

The woman stopped and stared at him, her eyes wide and grave. John soldiered on. "It's not interesting, really. Just a bunch of old books —"

A tear rolled down her cheek.

John sighed and took them on a tour of the upstairs, letting them flutter and coo. The woman dropped her diamond ring in the anthology section and the man lost his valuable toupee, but they had so much fun, they didn't realize it. John picked up the toupee with some distaste and was making up a *FOUND* sign when a pair of teenagers burst in the open door. "Way cool!"

"No way!"

"Yeah! He's got all the comics. Hey, look, maybe we could get this one. How much money do you have?"

They pulled a handful of coins and dropped them on the floor. Most of them were pennies that rolled everywhere. "Hey! Sorry, man!"

John sighed.

"HE'S NOT SELLING books, he's giving tours."

The Book of Spells slapped closed. "You got what you wanted."

"I did. I'm sorry. It's just that people tromping in and out, making the floors muddy and taking up his time isn't what I wanted. And he keeps calling people about their wallets and things."

"The second spell doesn't negate the first, you should know that."

"So now I have to make it all right in a third spell, with people dropping money and drooling all over me?"

The Book of Spells flipped through her pages briskly, as if she were a dealer peeling through a deck

of cards. "Got any ideas?"

John woke up and headed to the computer like a man possessed. He had never gotten up in the middle of the night like that before. Nathalie shielded her eyes and croaked, "John?"

"Sorry to bother you, hon. Go back to sleep." His voice was mechanical. He was typing.

She curled up with the blanket over her face. "It's all right. I'm glad you're working on your novel again."

"It's not my novel." The white screen pulsed as he wrote until dawn. He wasn't even tired when he went to shower and get dressed to go to the bookstore.

A MONTH LATER, Nathalie decorated Space and Time Books for the Hallowe'en party. She used orange and black crepe streamers and balloons, fake spider webs in the window, and miniature pumpkins filled with candy. The sign in the window declared:

HALLOWE'EN BOOK LAUNCH
ME AND SPACE AND TIME,
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN TSUI

It was a stroke of genius. People couldn't get enough of Space and Time Books, both in print and in actuality. John had finished the manuscript in a blaze of inspiration and persuaded a local print-on-demand service to take it on. He drank Heineken beer and joked with people about being a slave to the muse as he signed so many books that his hand cramped up. He just drank more beer and kept signing. Nathalie encouraged people to drink hot cider and nibble on sugar cookies as they waited in line. She also organized a system for the mounting pile of lost purses, wallets, chequebooks, jewellry, and other miscellania. "It's the Bermuda Triangle of Montreal," she muttered.

John made a mental note to use that in his next book. "Guess what? One guy just gave me a $100 tip!"

She smiled. "Are you putting out?"

"Only to you."

They grinned.

THE BOOKSTORE WAS a bit uncomfortable from all the body heat and the spilled cider.

"Oh, quit bellyaching," said *The Book of Spells.* "It's pretty clear you'll never be happy."

"I never expected to be *this* popular."

"Should've thought of better spells then." She blew a big cloud of dust, like insolent cigarette smoke. "Too late, you've had your three. Now my turn."

The bookstore's roof shingles stiffened in anticipation. "What is it?"

"I'm sick of being used. I thought people were bad enough, now I'm being used by a building! What's next; bacteria asking me for help to take over the world?"

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Hide me. Forever." The book spread its cover wide, then slammed it shut.

The bookstore was uncertain. "Now that I'm so busy, I'm really not a good place. Why don't you cast an invisibility spell on yourself or something?"

"Are you trying to worm your way out of payment?" The book lolled open and turned over some pages. "Because I know some really good curses."

The bookstore grabbed her and hid her under some unfiled cookbooks.

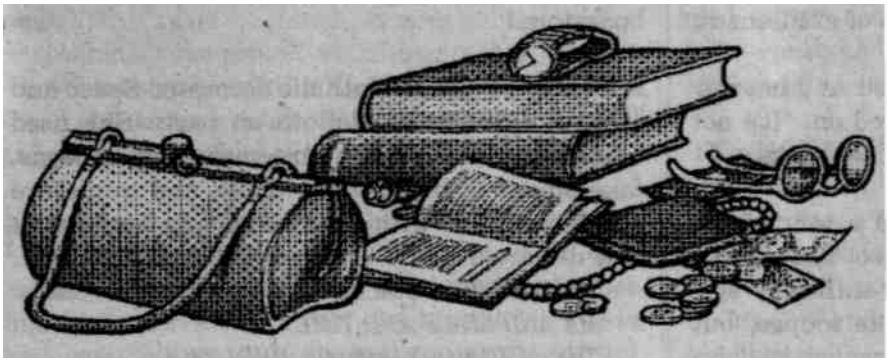
Eventually, John managed to finish and publish his novel, but the most attention he got was for his previous book. So he made up a lightly disguised autobiographical series about himself and Space and Time Books which sold much better. He hired some students, including Maggie, to help mind the store so he could spend more time writing.

Nathalie never did find *The Book of Spells,* though she swore it had to be in the back room somewhere. Maggie herself didn't look too hard. After all, everyone lost things at Space and Time Books. No one minded too much except the time that a millionaire's kid fell asleep in the back room and scared

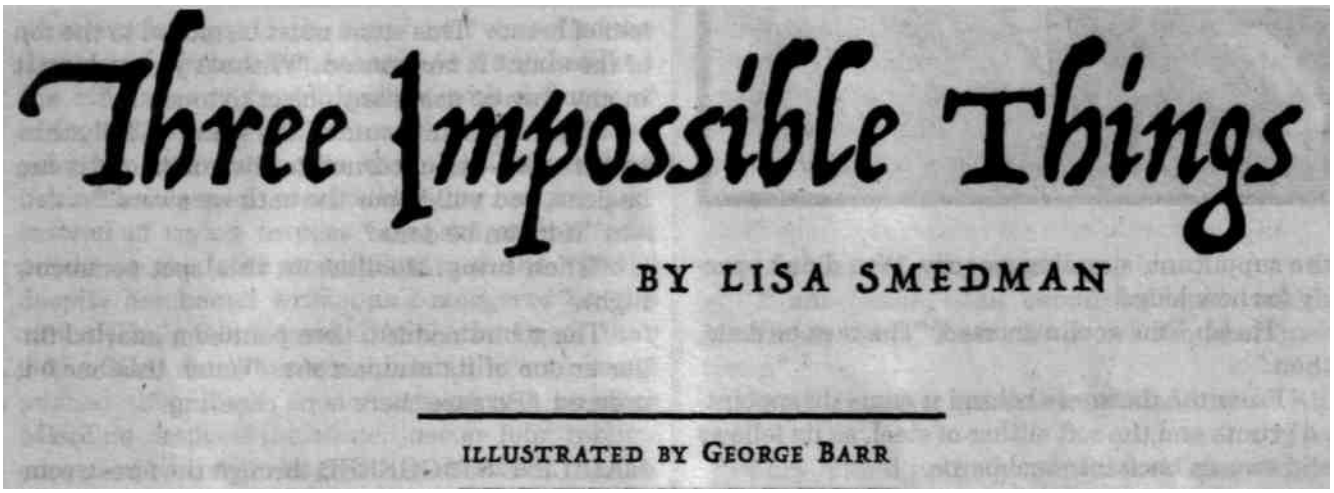
the bejeezus out of everyone. John got a reward and the kid got spanked.

As for Space and Time Books, it woke up at dawn every day to breathe the fresh air and look at the sky. It was December now, with wet snow mounting on its roof, and tinsel and lights in its window. A street cleaner paused to look at its display longingly. The bookstore sometimes missed the peaceful old days.

Once in a while, it touched *The Book of Spells*, which pulsed, warm and silent, wherever it was hidden. Space and Time Books brushed aside its uneasiness and listened to the chatter of various volumes. Soon John would come in and brew a fresh pot of coffee.



Melissa Yuan-Innes wishes there were more bookstores in the wilds of Eastern Ontario, whether magic or mortar, but her reading patterns have been erratic anyway since her bouncing baby boy was born in May. She writes novels, changes cloth diapers, and feebly updates her website at melissayuaninnes.info.



The goblin's eyes glowed yellow with reflected moonlight as it stared down at the supplicant from atop the ruined stone wall in the forest. It raised a small silver bell in gnarled fingers, and cocked a pointed ear.

"Ye be not brother to her, then?" it asked. "Nor uncle, nor cousin?"

The supplicant — a slender human with tousled brown hair and bare feet, dressed in knee-length trousers and a baggy peasant shirt — answered clearly. "I am none of those things."

The bell pealed once, a thin silver note in the darkness.

"Do ye love Madiline?" the goblin asked.

"I love her," the supplicant replied, eyes suddenly glistening. The bell pealed again.

Low chuckles gurgled in the forest around them, indicating they were not alone. The goblin waited until they fell silent. "This one speaks the truth," it pronounced. Then, to the supplicant, "Know ye this. To claim Madiline, ye must perform three impossible tasks, without the aid of magic. Fail at any one, and ye will die."

The supplicant nodded grimly.

"If ye succeed, Madiline is yours," the goblin continued. "But ye must swear an oath: the first child from any union of ye and she is ours, upon its thirteenth year. Do ye so swear?"

"I do."

The goblin chuckled, then glanced at a bucket that sat on the wall next to it. With a smirk that revealed pointed yellow teeth, it kicked the bucket to the human, who caught it deftly. "There be a stream, a short walk to the north. Ye must use this bucket to empty it. We will return, at Fullnight on the morrow, to see if the task be done." Then it hopped backward off the wall, disappearing from sight. Chortling laughter followed in its wake, along with one word, whispered on many tongues. "Impossible."

The supplicant stared at the bucket for a long moment, then grimly nodded as an idea sparkled in dark brown eyes. "Nothing's impossible."

THE SUPPLICANT KNELT, exhausted, arms and legs smeared with mud and hair limp with sweat. The bucket lay next to an empty streambed whose rocks still glistened in the moonlight. The stream itself now flowed through a channel that had been scraped in the forest floor. It poured with a loud gurgle down the steps of a ruined tower, into its dungeon.

"Very clever," the goblin said, leaning on a broom as it surveyed the rerouted stream. "But when the dungeon be full, the stream will seek its course again."

"You told me to empty the stream," retorted the supplicant, standing wearily. "You didn't specify for how long."

"Hmph," the goblin snorted. "The task be done, then."

From the darkness behind it came disappointed grunts and the soft slither of steel, as its fellows slid swords back into scabbards.

The goblin tossed the broom it held at the supplicant, and pointed at a tree with a trunk so wide that two humans — or three goblins — would have been pressed to encircle it. "The second task is to fell that tree, using this broom." It spat in the empty streambed, and smirked. "Dig all ye want, this time; it won't help ye none. The roots be as deep as the moon is high."

As the goblin slipped away into darkness, the supplicant picked up the broom and hefted it like a lever, eyebrows knitted together in a frown, then stared at the clump of dirty straw tied to one end. "Who said anything about digging?"

WHEN THE GOBLIN saw what the supplicant had done, it broke two teeth, so fiercely did it gnash them. Spitting out the jagged bits, it glared at the roaring fire that blazed brightly around the charred and smoking stump. The rest of the tree lay beside the fire, on a bed of smaller, splintered trees that had been knocked down when it fell.

"Ye cheated!" the goblin snarled. "Ye used fire." This time, its fellow goblins were visible in the firelight, their skin made even ruddier by the licking flames. They stood no taller than the supplicant's waist, but — like a pack of savage wolves — were capable of swift destruction.

The supplicant glared back at them, eyes bright in a soot-smudged face. "I used the straw as kindling, and the handle and string to make a fire drill. Without the broom, there'd have been no fire. The broom felled the tree."

"That be true," the goblin leader said grudgingly. Then it leered. "But the third task be the most impossible of all." It stalked toward a weed-choked staircase that led up to a ruined manor and pointed at a loose stone at its base, about the size of a loaf of bread. "This stone must be moved to the top of the stair," it announced. "Without ye touching it in any way, or using any object to touch it."

The supplicant counted the stairs — fully thirty of them — then turned to the goblin. "If it can be done, you will honor the oath we swore?" "If it can be done."

"Then bring Madiline to this spot tomorrow night."

The goblin nodded, then pointed a gnarled finger at one of its companions. "Watch this one," it ordered. "Be sure there is no cheating."

MADILINE STAGGERED through the forest, compelled to follow the goblins by the leather thong around her wrists and the spear point at her back. They jerked on her lead and prodded her with the spear, then dabbled dirty fingers in the blood that trickled down her bare back and sucked its potency from their fingertips. The girl's blonde hair, which had hung to her waist two years ago when her father honored his oath on her thirteenth birthday, had been shaved from her scalp. Her bare feet were blistered and cracked, her dress reduced to a rag that hung in tatters from her hips. As they led her to the supplicant who stood at the bottom of the ruined staircase, her eyes widened in recognition.

The goblin leader noted this — and the pained look the supplicant returned to the girl — with a leer. Then it glanced at the loose stone, still lying unmoved at the base of the staircase.

"Ye have failed," it told the supplicant. "Ye will die."

The goblins behind it licked their lips and wrenched swords out of scabbards.

"Wait!" The supplicant pointed up at the moon, which was just rising above distant hills. "It's not yet Fullnight. I have some moments yet to complete the task."

Muttering, the goblins looked to their leader, who rolled yellow eyes, then nodded at the stone. "Move it, then, if ye can."

Ignoring the goblin, the supplicant stepped toward the girl, and reached out to tilt up her chin. "Madiline, are you still strong?"

"They use me poorly," she answered in a strained voice. "But yes, I am still strong."

The supplicant's voice dropped to a whisper. "Strong enough to . . ."

The girl's eyes widened as the supplicant whispered in her ear, and she nodded.

Even as the goblins strained forward to hear what was being said, the supplicant wrenched the thong away from the one that held it and knocked the others away from Madiline with a flurry of kicks and blows. Madiline, suddenly free, seemed poised to run away into the night. The goblin behind her leaped forward, blocking her way, but instead of trying to pass him, she stooped and picked up the loose stone. Grunting, she lifted it despite her bound wrists, and staggered up the stairs. The goblins tried to grab the thong that still trailed from her wrists, but the supplicant pushed them back. A moment later, a panting Madiline dropped the stone, just as four goblins surged up the stair to grab her. It struck the top stair with a loud thud just as the moon climbed fully above the distant hills, marking the dawn of Fullnight.

"The third task is done!" the supplicant cried, half-buried under a swarm of goblins. Then, "Let me go!"

A furious look in its eye, the goblin leader beat its fellows until they fell back from the supplicant. "Ye did not complete the task," it howled, pointing at the spot where Madiline stood. "She did! Ye are mine to kill."

The supplicant, nose bloodied and arms and legs bruised, struggled to rise. "You said I couldn't touch the stone or use any object to move it. I didn't. I used a person, instead. You must honor your oath and set Madiline free."

The goblin's eyes narrowed to mere slits. It glanced up at the stone — and at Madiline, whose eyes shone with triumphant hope, and love for her rescuer. "Very well," it answered, in a voice grim as disease. "Ye have won the girl. But ye must honor your part of the oath, as well, by gifting us the first child of your union, upon its thirteenth year." It crooked a gnarled finger at the goblins who held Madiline, indicating they should escort her down the stairs, then turned evilly gleaming eyes back upon the supplicant. "The pact will continue, as it has done these three hundred years, since the kingdom of humans fell."

"No, it won't," the supplicant answered.

"Eh? What do ye mean by that? Ye swore ye were fertile, and your words rang true."

"I am fertile," the supplicant said, taking Madiline's hand. "I am also a girl. I'm Madiline's sister."

"No!" the other goblins howled. "A trick! Kill her!"

Fury blazed in the goblin leader's eyes, but at the same time it whirled on its fellows. "Stop!" it ordered. "I swore an oath, by the Foul One Below. Would you face his wrath?"

Grumbling, the goblins shook their heads. One or two spat on their blades, cutting their words.

"Farewell, then," Madiline's sister said. Grasping Madiline's hand, one wary eye still on the goblins,

she led her older sister away.

"Hrmph," the goblin leader spat. Then it glanced around at the ruins that dotted the forest.

"We set him — her — three impossible tasks. And she succeeded at four. I fear these humans are becoming too clever, by far."

Lisa Smedman is the author of the bestselling Extinction, *one of several she's written set in the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game's Forgotten Realms universe. Her original novel,* The Apparition Trail - *an alternative history that mixes Mounties and magic - was published in 2004, and* Viper's Kiss, *the second book in her* House of Serpents *trilogy, was published in 2005. She has designed gaming products for* Star Wars, Cyberpunk, *and* Deadlands, *among others, and her new children's novel* Creature Catchers *is due for release from Annick Press in 2007 - as is a nonfiction history of the motorcycle. Lisa currently splits her week between her job as an editor at the weekly* Vancouver Courier *and writing fiction. She lives in Richmond, British Columbia, with her wife, their son, four cats, and two pugs.*

The Fey that were, are no more.
The Urbana that are, were not once.
Nails, bolts, girders - cold iron - poison
Bones and sinew of man's cities.
Dodo, Passenger Pigeon, Dryad
Rat, Shatter, Skitter, losers and winners.
— The Urbana

Jack stared out the museum's window, watching the snow melt. It was mid-March, Minnesota's ugliest season, when the winds slithered across the remaining masses of gritty gray snow, sucking out the cold and gifting it to anyone foolish or unlucky enough to be on the streets. One of these dirt-encrusted snowbanks held the object of his observation. At some point in the course of the winter, a plastic Calvin's Convenience bag had been entombed in the snow. But with the melt it had almost worked itself loose, trapped now only by a bit of ice pinning one corner. With each puff of the early spring wind, the bag inflated and fluttered wildly as though trying to break free. Then the wind would shift or die, and the bag would settle back, hiding the bright green and purple blaze of its logo. The process had repeated itself for hours, and Jack had become totally fascinated.

Jack had started watching because he had nothing better to do, and because the Science Museum was a warm place open to all. As he watched the bag's antics, he rolled a tiny sculpture over and over in his hands, a bronze of three elephants supporting a globe on their backs. His mother had given it to him as a going away gift when he left Minot, North Dakota.

It was a classic emblem of their relationship: expensive, ugly, and heavy, at least in an emotional sense. But it was also a talisman that represented home, and he couldn't bring himself to throw it away, not now. As he was tucking it back into his bag, a balding security guard passed him for the third time in as many minutes, looking more disapproving on each pass. Jack grabbed his heavy green mountain-pack and walked over to stare unhappily at the clock again. He hoped the guards would think he was waiting for someone. Afterward, he found a seat under the hanging stairs, where he was less visible. It was the fifth time he'd moved, and he didn't think they would let him get away with a sixth.

He had just decided to find another public building when he noticed the rag-clad girl. She could have been as young as twelve or as old as fifteen. It was hard to guess, as thin as she was, and as dirty. She stood about five feet tall and was wrapped from ankle to neck in a wild motley of plastic and cloth rags in every shade of the rainbow, though they were all faded and washed out as if they'd spent too much time in the sun. He couldn't see any seams holding it all together or any way of putting it on or taking it off. The rags seemed to have just curled themselves around her and decided to stay in place.

After all the dark looks security had directed his way, Jack couldn't imagine how the ragged girl had

gotten in. Jack was at least still presentable, since he'd only ducked out on his rent that morning. He was still relatively well-fed, and he'd started his day with a shower though it was cold because his electricity had been turned off.

He watched in disbelief as the girl walked blithely past the same guard who had been giving Jack the nastiest looks without so much as drawing a raised eyebrow. He was even more amazed when she slid into the alcove where the pay phones and vending machines lurked. Her hand darted quickly from a fold in the rags that clothed her to the coin-return box of the first phone in line. Then she took a step to her left and repeated the process, pausing only when she was wracked by a brief series of coughs. He couldn't believe she was checking the machines for coins in broad daylight. He felt a brief stab of jealousy. Her transgression was going unpunished.

Then the guard started coming his way again and Jack knew he had to move on. He didn't feel homeless, or jobless, but that didn't change facts. As he left the building he passed the bag trapped by the ice. Feeling a sudden irrational sympathy for its imprisonment, he pulled it loose and tossed it into the air, willing it to find its freedom. A sudden gust caught it and whirled it toward a tree where other bits of wind-blown debris had snagged on limbs and been captured. For no sane reason he held his breath as the rag of plastic went straight in amongst the grasping branches. Several times as it ran this gauntlet, the bag seemed to have been hooked and he winced.

But each time it worked itself free again, until a final outflung twig speared the handle, and Jack knew the game was over. Groaning with a grief he hadn't expected, he turned away. But he'd gone less than thirty feet when the wind's tone changed from a light snake's hiss to a screaming banshee wail. Sudden hope filled him and he turned and looked back. His heart lifted as the handle parted and the bag broke loose, tumbling away toward the river.

"I'LL CUT YOU. Don't be stupid!"

The speaker wore filthy clothes that looked as though they had been salvaged from a dumpster. He was also much smaller than Jack's own farm-fed six feet and he looked malnourished. But the anger in his eyes and the steady way he held the knife convinced Jack not to argue. There was nothing in his backpack worth dying for, though he knew he'd miss the mummy-bag that night. Slipping the pack off his shoulders, he held it out.

"Drop it. Now the wallet."

That was easy to part with as well. The only things in it were a maxed-out credit card and a driver's license with the worst picture he'd ever had. His twenty remaining dollars were tucked into the left heel of his battered black Reeboks. His fingers brushed against the little bronze in the breast pocket of his worn leather bomber as he pulled the torn nylon wallet out. Jack had moved the sculpture from pack to jacket a day earlier, for reasons he couldn't fully articulate, reasons having to do with home and family and failure and growing up. He tossed his wallet down beside the pack.

"Turn around. All right. Maybe you're not such a dumb Swede after all. Maybe you get to live. Maybe. If you . . . Run!"

Jack bolted like the high-school sprinter he'd once been. At least he tried to. He was used to

Norwegian farm cooking with lots of family-raised beef and potatoes. But he'd been on the streets for almost a week now with meals few and far between and, for the month before that, he'd been living on ramen noodles and white rice. He started to feel weak and sweaty before he'd covered twenty feet. After going a block without hearing any pursuit, he allowed himself to slow. There weren't any showers or laundromats in his near future, so the less he exerted himself, the better.

Another block put him at the door of the Greyhound station. He ducked inside and dropped into a cracked yellow vinyl seat. A speaker announced a bus leaving for Grand Forks. He felt a twinge in his chest as though an alley cat had taken a swipe at his heart. That was more than halfway home. Instinctively, his hand felt for the statue in his pocket. Still there.

He remembered the morning of his departure. For several years he'd wanted to head out to Minneapolis. He'd been there twice with his high school for one-act-play regionals. They'd done well, though they hadn't won, and both times he'd gotten a separate award for best actor. When he'd told his drama teacher of his plans to look for a theater job, she'd encouraged him, telling him he had what it took. But when Jack said he wanted to go to New York or Hollywood she'd shaken her head.

"Start smaller," she'd said. "You need seasoning first, toughening. Try Minneapolis, it's big enough for a beginning."

Jack had nodded. That would be all right: he'd fallen in love with Minneapolis on his first visit. The constant background hum of a million people in conversation was the perfect antidote for the desolate sounds of the wind blowing across a hundred thousand acres of empty prairie grass. He was entranced by the view from the Guthrie Theater's pedestrian bridge, the way the tail-lights of the cars at rush hour formed a giant red snake. It would sit coiled and still for minutes at a time, waiting for the traffic signal to blink green. Then the great electric asp would snap forward, striking at the newer buildings of Uptown. He delighted in being able to walk around any corner and meet a dozen people he hadn't known his whole life; in the twenty-four-hour-a-day pulse of the city, the lights, the sounds, and, especially, in the glamour of the theater. Nothing could be further from Minot.

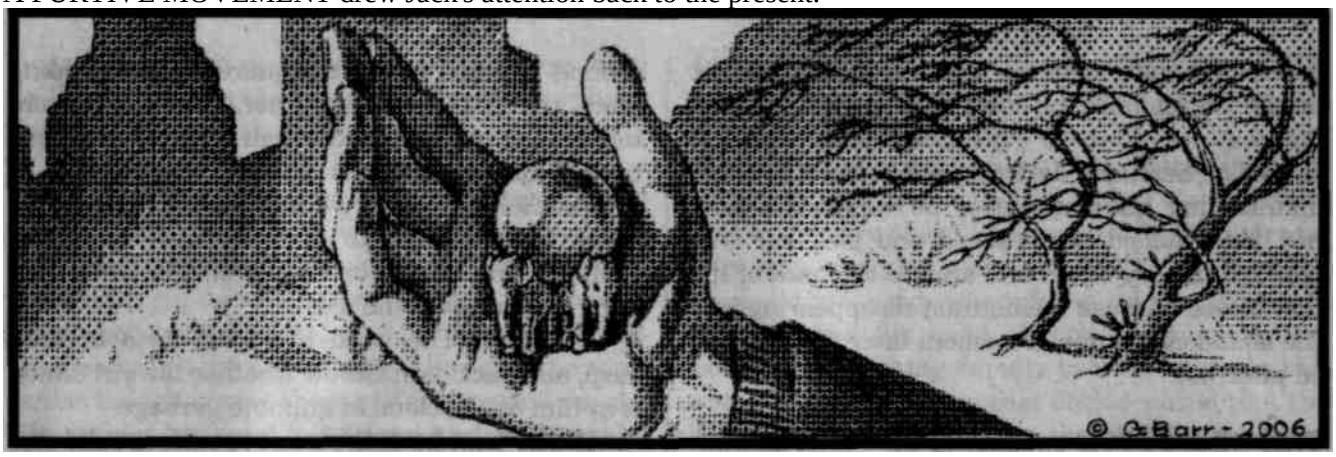
So Jack had finally made up his mind to leave. He'd bought a bus ticket and told his parents. They argued of course, Mom weeping and Dad speaking slowly and carefully in his North Dakotan accent, but never raising his voice. Jack had never in his entire life heard his dad's tone vary from that same flat delivery, whether he was telling a joke or talking about a failed wheat harvest.

The argument ended when Jack showed them his ticket and told them the bus left that afternoon. He'd paid good money for it, and staying would have wasted that. If there was one principle his family held absolutely, it was waste not, want not. His father had shaken his head and Jack's hand with an equal sadness and gone to get the pickup ready for the drive into town. His mother had looked around for a parting gift and finally snatched up the elephant sculpture.

His parents had brought it back from their one and only trip outside North Dakota. They'd found it at a little shop in Honolulu and just loved it. He must have heard the story of that trip a thousand times growing up.

"Here," she'd said, thrusting it into his hands. "For luck." Then she'd given him a hug and checked through his luggage to make sure he'd packed sensibly.

A FURTIVE MOVEMENT drew Jack's attention back to the present.



It was the girl from the Museum. Once again she was at the pay phones, putting her hand into a fold of her clothes and then into the coin return slot. It wasn't until she'd left that he realized the sequence was wrong. Both times he'd seen her, she'd reached into her clothes first. He got up and walked to the phones. Glancing left and right, he reached into one of the coin slots. The quarter was still warm from her touch. He found a dime next. Too broke for pride, he went down the line, collecting a dollar thirty.

For several long minutes he stared at the change and considered making a call home. His parents would wire him money for a bus ticket, but . . . He imagined how it would be like to go home to a place where everyone knew his name, and where they would all know he hadn't been able to make it in the city. He thought about trying to fit himself into the small town life, forcing dreams that had grown to encompass the whole city back into the cramped psychic space of Minot. He shook his head. It would feel like amputating bits of his soul. He wasn't that hungry. Not yet.

JACK WAS SWEATING and shaking as he leaned against the sun-warmed brick of the pawnshop. The man had offered him ten dollars for the little sculpture, had even opened the register and pulled out a bill. That was when Jack snatched up his elephants and ran out. He wasn't willing to let go of the city yet, but neither was he ready to surrender his old home. The last of his money — the change left by the rag girl — had gone for a two-for-one deal at a taco shop. That had been early yesterday, and he hadn't eaten since. It was the hunger that sent him into the downtown pawnbroker's.

But he'd found he wasn't hungry enough. He held his mother's gift up to the light. Three bronze elephants stood facing outward, tails entwined. Balanced in the hollow formed by their down-sloping backs was a copper globe, easily big enough to hold any of the elephants inside it.

It was exactly as it had always been, an ugly reminder of home. Yet, he found it precious too. As a small child he'd seen it as a magic talisman of places far away and mysterious, places that weren't North Dakota. He had often lifted it down from the mantle and rubbed the ball like Aladdin's lamp. Each time, his mother had taken it from him and put it back in its place of honor, scolding him. But then, each time, she had taken him on her lap and told him about the trip to distant Hawaii. How they'd kept it on their bedside table in the hotel, and how it had watched over them when he was first "dreamed up." Of course she never mentioned any details. Good Scandinavian Lutherans didn't discuss such things.

Smiling, he slid the sculpture back into his jacket pocket. When he looked up again he saw the girl for the third time. She was stepping out of a phone booth a third of a block away on his right. His first thought was to walk down and grab the change. The impulse brought him to his feet. But once he reached the booth he thought to wonder why she'd put it there. He hastily snatched the change, then hurried after the girl. Though she didn't seem to be walking very quickly, she covered a lot of ground, and what started as a half-block lead quickly grew to a block. He jogged to keep from losing her.

March had faded into April, taking the snow with it, though a late storm was still possible. Jack found himself growing quite warm as he trotted after the girl. Wabasha Street tumbled down through the heart of downtown, from the capitol building to the Mississippi, like an asphalt tributary. The girl followed, crossing from under the shadows of the concrete pinnacles out onto the cracked sidewalks of the Wabasha Bridge. Midway across the span, between the warehouse district on the low end and the office towers on the high, a stairway led down to Pig's Eye Island. The girl turned off here, and Jack stopped at the stairhead, maintaining his distance so he wouldn't startle her. He watched her descend and pick her way through the dry brush and around the back of the now closed garbage incinerator, disappearing into the abandoned dump. A moment later, he descended after her.

THE GIRL STOOD twirling in the center of what Jack could only think of as a trash devil, a miniature tornado of old newspapers, torn plastic bags, magazine ads, and fast food wrappers. From his hiding place flattened atop a low wall, Jack looked on in open-mouthed wonder. Any number of times since he'd moved here from North Dakota he had seen a piece of light plastic flotsam caught up in one of the standing eddies created by the winds, scurrying through the artificial canyons of downtown, drifting down, looping around and then being thrown high into the air again by a dervish wind to begin the pattern anew. It often seemed as if the burger wrapper or whatever it was had a life of its own. If he'd ever doubted that animating force, he would never do so again.

As he continued to watch, he saw one bit of sky-borne trash after another dip to brush against the girl's cheeks or momentarily writhe around her ankles, like a crowd of cats welcoming their caregiver home. Where before he had seen only that she was filthy and clad in rags, he could now tell they were made from bits of the wind-tossed trash.

When he thought he could be no more amazed, he noticed a plastic shopping bag, seemingly heavily laden, come drifting down from the bridge top above. One handle was torn, and a familiar purple and green logo marked its side. When it was only a few feet above the girl it twisted in the air and emptied itself, disgorging a twenty dollar bill and a bit of sandwich. She caught the bag out of the air, spun it around once and blew a kiss into it, sending it sailing up and toward Jack. Then she bent down, coughing harshly, and collected her prizes.

He rolled onto his back to see what the bag would do next and found it directly above him, turning slow circles like a hawk over a rabbit.

Though it had no eyes, nothing could be clearer than that it watched him. Then, before he could move again, it went spiraling back to waft past the girl's ear in a whisper of wind. Her head snapped around to focus her gaze squarely on his hiding place and he froze. Around her, the twisting contents of the trash devil rose high in the air and bent toward him, a giant's fist of wildly colored junk.

Jack felt the vortex pulling the breath from his lungs, and wanted to run, to hide, anything. Rolling over, he slid backward on the wall, dangling his legs over the side.

"Sssstop!" The word came out as a breathy gasp, and Jack didn't know whether the girl aimed it at him or the cloud of animate garbage.

Either way, he didn't want to stick around and find out. He dropped onto his feet. But then the Calvin's bag flitted past his ear, and seemed to whisper to him. "Pleassse ssstay." It was so soft and sibilant that he couldn't swear it had even happened. Still, he paused.

After a quick climb, the girl peered down at him from the top of the wall. She was haloed by the whirling trash. Jack flinched, and the girl responded by looking over her shoulder and waving dismissively. The trash devil came apart in a burst of loose debris.

Jack followed the girl down the alley. It was after bar rush and downtown seemed as devoid of life as a fresh-poured parking lot. They were making their way along the back of the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* building. A tall chain-link fence separated the paper's parking lot from the alley. All along the base of this barrier, trapped bits of old newspaper had been caught and turned into a sort of crude papier-mache wall by water from the melting snow.

Sitha didn't seem interested in talking. She could, or Jack wouldn't have known her name, but in the three days he had spent with her, she hadn't said more than a hundred words. If Jack had come from a more demonstrative background, it might have bothered him, but his Norwegian farm family always treated speech as a necessary evil. Once, when the old family tractor had caught on fire, his father had gotten off and calmly put out the fire with an extinguisher. Then he turned to Jack, who had just run up, and, in his normal flat voice, said, "Well dat about does it for today den." After which he'd turned and marched off to the house without another word.

Sitha squatted to run a hand along the rough edges of a bit of soggy paper and signed for Jack to do the same. Kneeling beside her, he took a piece between thumb and forefinger. With a sense he hadn't known he possessed a week ago, he could feel a deadness in the scrap, as though it had been drained of potential.

"I don't understand," he said.

She pointed at a bit of fluttering plastic higher on the fence. "Skitter." He knew that name now. She used it to refer to the little animate pieces of trash that slithered and flew through the streets. Next she plucked the wire of the fence so that it hummed a low note. "Boundary." She spat the word out as though it were the name of her worst enemy. She caught his hand in her own and set it on the place where the plastic rag touched the fence.

Almost at the instant of contact, he jerked away in revulsion. Like a spider sucking the juices from a trapped fly, some inhabitant of the fence was draining away the vital essence of the trapped Skitter, and he had felt that slow dying through his skin. He shuddered and looked at Sitha. She reached up and carefully, even tenderly, pulled the bit of flotsam loose from the fence, blowing hard on it to start it tumbling away toward the darkened street. The effort generated one of the coughing fits that took her periodically.

It was a circumstance that was becoming familiar to Jack. Sitha was sick, possibly dying, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do for her. When he'd suggested she go to one of the city's free clinics, she'd growled low in her throat like an angry hound and spat before whispering the words "social services" in the same tone she used on the word "Boundary."

When she could breathe normally again, she moved on, pausing periodically to free a trapped Skitter.

After an hour or so they had finished what Jack took to be Sitha's Thursday night round. Several times over the course of the evening he had been able to reach some imprisoned scrap of paper or plastic that was too high for Sitha. As they headed back toward the island dump where he had first met her, the Calvin's bag that seemed to have claimed him rolled up and bumped against his leg. It acted like a dog joining its master. Then a seemingly random current of air lifted it past his ear.

"Folloooow," it seemed to whisper, though he couldn't say that hearing was the sense it appealed to. He looked a question at Sitha and she nodded in assent, so when the bag turned aside from their original route, they went after it.

It led them to the dumpster behind Ted's Diner where it rolled around on the lid. Inside, Jack found a to-go bag with four entrees in it, apparently thrown out when the person who ordered them hadn't shown up. The food hadn't even had the time to go completely cold.

As they turned to head back down the alley, Jack saw the man who had stolen his backpack coming toward them. The man smiled in a predatory way when his eyes met Jack's. But then his gaze slid to the side where Sitha stood, and he suddenly bowed his head slightly before reversing course and walking rapidly back the way he had come. It was only then that Jack realized that the few other homeless people they had seen during the course of their evening had also turned respectfully away at Sitha's approach, as if she were some sort of gutter royalty.

Later, as he and Sitha finished their feast, sitting in the rusty shell of the Econoline van she lived in, she pulled out a package wrapped in greasy canvas. Inside lay a book with circuit-board covers. "The Urbana" was spelled out in a nonsensical circuit of gold on the translucent green plastic.

"Urbana," she said, lengthening the second syllable so that it sounded like the bahn in autobahn and opening her arms in a gesture that included the whole city around her. "Skitter." She held up a finger. "Boundary." Another finger. "Heap." She pointed at the nearest junk mound. "All Urbana." She stopped then, as she had another small coughing fit. "Take this," she gasped, handing him the book. "Read!" It was an order. She gestured toward the big old hulk of a Chrysler LeBaron that she had ceded to him as a temporary home.

The light from the streetlamps on the road above was dim, and the hand that had written the book was spidery, but Jack still managed to make out the first few pages of the oblique verse before drifting off to sleep.

The book told the story of the rise of a new, urban fey who had moved into the magical vacuum left open by the iron-bred death of their predecessors. He'd already met the Skitters and the Boundaries that preyed on them. Now he also learned something about the Heaps, which ranged from the benign Composts who lived in backyards, feeding on the decay process of waste turning to black dirt, to the terrible Toxics who came in the night, hiding under the earth to poison and kill. He also read a bit about the Packets, little creatures of electricity and thought that nested in cell phones and other electronic devices, when they weren't flitting back and forth across the city.

"SECRETS," WHISPERED SITHA, the last sibilant turning into a cough as she spoke it. She lay on a pallet in the afternoon sun. He had helped her out there and wrapped her in blankets. She should have been plenty warm, but still she shivered and coughed. "Skitters know. Skitters will tell. They must be guarded and guided." She coughed again. "You must do it."

She was spending words with a profligacy that, in light of her normal quiet, alarmed Jack. He knelt beside her and felt her forehead. She was on fire. "Damnit. You need a hospital."

"No!" It came out in a gasp but with steely firmness. She reached up and caught his collar in her left hand, tugging at it. Clearly she wanted to pull him down close to listen to her, but she didn't have the strength. He leaned in. "Remember." She pursed her lips and let out a surprisingly strong whistle. It was a trilling sound she often used to

call the Skitters, but with more embellishments, The wind started to rise around them. "I'm not a very good whistler," he said. She shook her head. "Make your own call when

you take the crown." He wanted to tell her that he didn't want a crown, but he couldn't find the words. A scrap of fancy notepaper blew into Sitha's hand.

"Look!" she demanded of him. He glanced at it just to satisfy Sitha's request, then stopped and took a longer look. A love letter, it was written by a prominent state politician to a man not her husband. "And this." She passed him a bit of yellow paper, a credit card receipt with all the numbers and information clearly visible. The expiration date had not been reached. "Secrets!" she said again.

This time the coughing fit went on and on till Jack couldn't bear it any longer. "You are going to a hospital," he said, sliding his arms under Sitha, half lifting her.

But she produced a straight razor, seemingly from thin air, and placed it against his throat. "No," she wheezed; and he could feel the edge twitching against his skin as her hand shook with the effort of holding the blade up. "Want to die here, with my family." Her other hand waved feebly at the dump where a thousand shreds of garbage fluttered and whispered in the wind. "They love me. They need me."

"Not dead, they don't," Jack replied.

"Someone must watch over them, protect them from other powers, people who would misuse their secrets. They're too weak to care for themselves."

"And so are you," he said. "You're going to die." "No hospitals." The words came out in a cough, a cough with blood in it. She dropped the straight razor then and groped around for her copy of *The Urbana*. He'd brought it to her earlier when she asked for it. "This is yours now." She pushed the book toward him. "The Skitters know you. They'll listen to you, help you, love you." Before he could reply, her eyes closed; she passed out or fell asleep, he couldn't tell which. Carefully, he set her back down and cleaned the blood off her face and the shoulder of his jacket.

Jack stared at his parents' elephant statue. In the red and smoky light of the trash fire, it seemed to be bathed in blood. Like my hands, he thought, glancing over his shoulder toward the old Econoline. Then he turned back to face the fire and the city beyond. In the past month he had learned to judge time by looking at the lights of downtown. It was currently somewhere around 4:00 A.M. In a couple more hours he would take the statue, his only remaining possession, and walk to the bus depot. From there he would place two phone calls. One would be to Minot, asking for a ticket. The other would be to 911 to tell them about a very sick girl living in an abandoned van in a dump. At least he hoped she was still only very sick at that point. It was all too likely she'd be dead when they got there.

He knew now that Sitha believed she was dying, had believed it for some time. Probably since before he met her. She wanted him to replace her. He'd built the small fire after sunset when he put her in the van, adding his covers to her own. He wanted the firelight to read by and as a comfort. He'd built it as Sitha had taught him, carefully shielded from any possible watching eyes. For three hours he'd read, forcing his way through *The Urbana's* difficult verses. Then he'd carefully closed the book, set it down, and pulled out the elephants. He'd made his decision.

SOMETIME AROUND DAWN the fire burned itself out. Jack, sitting in a bucket seat torn from an '85 Cadillac, didn't bother to add more fuel. He would be leaving shortly. Rush hour would start soon, and with it, the morning witching hour of the Urbana. Dawn and dusk, midnight and noon were the magic times of an earlier era, one tied to the pulse of the planet, not the life of the city.

The previous night he'd hit a section in *The Urbana* he hadn't seen before. It was about the bright-lights, big-city glamour that drew the credulous out of the country. He was smart enough to recognize himself in the passages — Sitha too. Though she hadn't told him much about herself, he'd discovered that she also came from rural roots. When he finished that portion of the text, he knew he was going home. The city had sucked them both in, and it had killed Sitha. He didn't want it to do the same to him.

When the noise of the traffic began to increase, Jack rose to check on Sitha. He would be calling her an ambulance soon, and he thought it would be best if he could describe her current condition. Away from the fire, the early morning air was frigid, and the door of the van felt like ice. Sitha lay within, perfectly still. Jack knew then, but he had to find out for certain. Reaching down, he placed a hand on her cheek. She was as cold as the metal walls that surrounded her.

He constructed Sitha a rough pyre of scrap and laid her body out on a sheet of plywood atop it. He knew her hatred of the city's officialdom, and though he had been willing to deliver her into their hands if it would save her life, giving her up to them in death would be a pointless betrayal.

Jack placed the book of the Urbana under her right hand and prepared to light the pile. Once that was done, he would go. He struck a match, but a wind sprang up, a tightly-focused circling breeze that lifted the lightest trash into the air and blew out his flame. He fell back away from the pyre as the ragged paper shape of a Skitter spun down to wrap itself tightly around Sitha's throat. Then another, a sack this time, opened up to swallow her hand. In a process that felt like it took hours, but couldn't actually have gone on for more than a few minutes, she was completely mummified.

Jack was both fascinated and repulsed. By now he had learned enough of the Skitters to understand that each one who bound itself to her body was committing suicide, ending its aerial life. Like the

servants of a great king of old, they were dying to honor their fallen monarch. When they were done, the air went calm and still and he could feel a waiting, hoping pressure in the silence.

Slowly, reluctantly, he approached the body. Reaching into his coat, he pulled out the little elephant statue and held it up, weighing it against Sitha's request and the Skitters' need and loyalty beyond life. The sculpture had never seemed more precious than it did right at that moment, with all of its promise of the clean open skies of Minot. He stood there and stared down at the rag-wrapped body as the sounds of the city waking up built around him. All through rush hour he remained there, nearly motionless. Sometime, after the frantic stop and go pace of morning traffic slowed into a quiet steady thrum, he heard a crinkling plastic sound in his ear.

"Sssstay?" The Calvin's bag, his first Skitter, slowly orbited his head. He couldn't say how long it had been there. "Pleasssse. Sssstay."

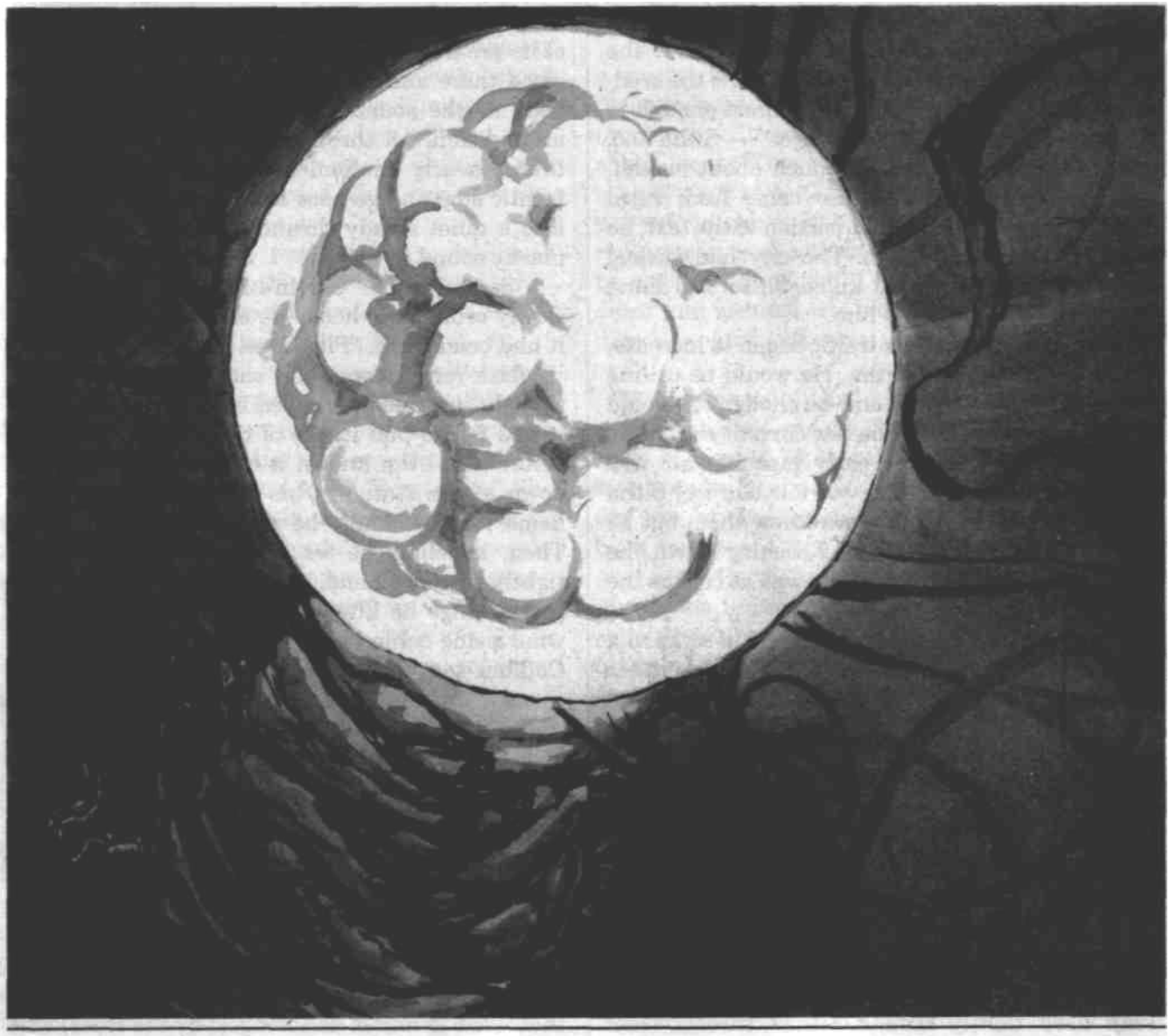
Jack remembered how sad he'd been when he thought it would be trapped in that tree, how good it had felt to pull it free of the ice. And that was before he'd even known it had a soul. He looked down at the statue in his hand, seeing in it the home he now knew he would never return to. Then, kneeling, he set the elephants in Sitha's tightly wrapped hand, a funeral gift from her heir. In exchange he lifted up the book and, with the wind rising behind him, he walked back to the old Cadillac seat that would be his new throne.

Four years had passed since Jack first took up the garbage crown of the Skitter King. For all that time they had supported him, bringing him money and bits of food as they had the queen who preceded him. In return he filled the coin boxes each spring, interceding on the behalf of his strange people. It was the dying season for them, when they emerged from their long hibernation under the snow and ice only to be caught and killed by the Boundaries, the spirits that lived in fences and hedges; by the trees, who were still nature's creatures and the implacable enemies of all things Urbana; and by all the other little powers that fed on their anima.

He knew that someday a dying season would take him as it had taken Sitha and a new ruler would mount the throne.

The king is dead. Long live the King.

Kelly McCullough made his debut in WEIRD TALES. *His work has since appeared in many magazines and anthologies. "Dying Season" is the second of his Urbana stories to appear here, and a novel in the series in now under consideration elsewhere. His first novel,* Webmage, *came out in August from Ace, with a sequel due in '07.*



ILLUSTRATED BY ALEX MCVEY

Buried in the Sky

BY JOHN SHIRLEY

"Imagination called up the shocking form of fabulous Yog=Sothoth ~ only a congeries of iridescent globes, yet stupendous in its malign suggestiveness...."

~ H.P. LOVECRAFT

If he didn't kill Mom, then why are we moving away?" Deede asked. "We're moving because I have a better job offer in L.A.," Dad said, barely audible as usual, as he looked vaguely out the living room window at the tree-lined street. Early evening on a Portland June. "I'll be working for a good magazine — very high profile. See those clouds? Going to rain again. We won't have all this rain in L.A., anyhow.... Hanging Gardens will be a nice change. . . . You'll like L.A. high schools, the kids are very — uh — hip." Wearing his perpetual work shirts, jeans, and a dully stoic expression, he was a paunchy, pale, gray-eyed man with shaggy blond hair just starting to gray, too. He stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing outward from the house. In a lower voice he said, "They said it was an accident or..." He didn't like to say suicide. "So — we have to assume that's right and ... we can't harass an innocent man. Better to leave it all behind us."

Deede Bergstrom — waist-length sandy-blonde hair, neohippie look — was half watching MTV, the sound turned off; on the screen a woman wearing something like a bikini crossed with a dress was posturing and pumping her hips. Deede's hips were a shade too wide and she'd never call attention to them like that.

Deede knew Dad didn't want the travel-writer job in L.A. that much — he liked Portland; he didn't like Los Angeles, except as a subject for journalism; and the travel-editor job with the Portland newspaper paid their bills. He was just trying to get them away from the place where mom had died because everything they saw here was a reminder. And they had to get over it.

Didn't you have to get over it, when someone murdered your mother?

Sure. Sure you do. You just have to get over it.

"You think he killed her, too, Dad," said Lenny matter-of-factly, as he came in. He'd been in the kitchen, listening. The peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich dripped in his hand as he looked at his Dad, and took an enormous bite.

"You're spilling blueberry jelly on the carpet," Deede pointed out. She was curled up in the easy chair with her feet tucked under her skirt to keep them warm. The heat was already turned off, in preparation for the move, and it wasn't as warm out as it should've been, this time of year.

"Shut up, mantis-girl," Lenny said, the food making his voice indistinct. He was referring to her long legs and long neck. He was a year older than Deede, had just graduated high school. His hair was buzz-cut, and he wore a muscle shirt — he had the muscles to go with it — and a quizzical expression. His chin was a little weak, but his features otherwise were almost TV-star good looking. The girls at school had liked him.

"Lenny, I've asked you not to call your sister that, and go and get a paper towel and clean up your mess," Dad said, without much conviction. "Deana, where's your little sister?"

They called her Deede because her name was Deana Diane. Deede shrugged. "Jean just leaves when she wants to . . ." And then she remembered. "Oh yeah, she went rollerblading with that Buzzy kid. . . "

Lenny snorted. "That little stoner."

Dad started to ask if Lenny had a good reason to think his youngest sister was hanging with stoners — Deede could see the question was about to come out of him — but then his lips pinched shut. Decided not to ask. "Yeah, well . . . Buzzy won't be coming with us to L.A., so ..." He shrugged.

Dad was still looking out the window, Deede mostly watching the soundless TV.

And Lenny was looking at the floor while he listlessly ate his sandwich, Deede noticed, looking over from the TV. Dad out the window, her at TV, Lenny at the floor.

Mom at the interior of her coffin lid.

"I think we should stay and push them to reopen it," Deede said, doggedly.

Dad sighed. "We don't know that Gunnar Johansen killed anyone. We know that mom was jogging and Johansen was seen on the same jogging trail and later on she was found dead. There wasn't even

agreement at the coroner's on whether she'd been ..."

He didn't want to say *raped.*

"He was almost bragging about it," Lenny said tonelessly, staring at the rug, his jaws working on the sandwich. "'Prove it!' he said." Deede could see the anger in his eyes but you had to look for it. He was like Dad, all internal.

"It was two years ago," Deede said. "I don't think the police are going to do anything else. But we could hire a private detective." Two years. She felt like it was two weeks. It'd taken almost six months for Deede to be able to function in school again after they found mom dead. "Anyway — I saw it ... in a way."

"Dreams." Dad shook his head. "Recurrent dreams aren't proof. You're going to like L.A."

She wanted to leave Portland — and she also wanted to stay here and make someone put Johansen in jail. But she couldn't stay here alone. Even if she did, what could she do about him, herself? She was afraid of him. She saw him sometimes in the neighborhood — he lived a block and a half down — and every time he looked right at her. And every time, too, it was like he was saying, *killed your mom and I liked it and I want to kill you too and pretty soon I will.* It didn't make sense, her seeing all that, when he had no particular expression on his face. But she was sure of it, completely sure of it. He had killed her mom. And he'd liked it. And he had killed some other people and he'd liked that too.

She had no proof at all. Recurrent dreams aren't proof.

"... the movers are coming in about an hour," Dad was saying. "We're going to have a really good new life." He said it while looking out the window and he said it tonelessly. He didn't even bother to make it sound as if he really believed the part about a really good new life.

Two days later, they were ready to go to Los Angeles — and it had finally started to warm up in Oregon, like it was grudgingly admitting it was the beginning of summer. "Now that we're leaving, it's nice out," Jean said bitterly, from the back seat of the Explorer. The sky was showing through the clouds, and purple irises edging the neighbor's lawn were waving in the breeze and then, as Deede just sat in the front seat of the car, waiting for her Dad to drive her and her brother and Jean to the I-5 freeway, she saw Johansen walking down the street toward them, walking by those same irises.

Dad was looking around one last time, to see if he'd forgotten to do anything, making sure the doors to the house were locked. He would leave the keys for the realtor, in some pre-arranged place. The house where Deede had grown up with her mother was sold and in a few minutes would be gone from her life forever. . . .

Jean and Lenny didn't see Johansen, Lenny was in back beside Jean, his whole attention on playing with the PSP and Jean was looking at the little TV screen over the back seat of the SUV. Fourteen years old, starting to get fat; her short-clipped hair was reddish brown, her face heart-shaped like mom's had been, the same little dimples in her cheeks. She was chewing gum and fixedly watching a Nickelodeon show she probably didn't like.

Deede wasn't going to point Johansen out to her. She didn't much relate to her little sister — Jean seemed to blame Deede for not having the same problems. Jean had dyslexia, and Deede didn't; Jean had attention deficit, and Deede didn't. Jean had gotten only more bitter and withdrawn since Mom had died. She didn't want anyone acting protective. Deede felt she had to try to protect her anyway.

Johansen was getting closer.

"This building we're moving into, it's, like, lame, living in a stupid-ass building after living in a house," Jean said, snapping her gum ever few syllables, her eyes on the SUV's television.

"It's not just any stupid-ass building," Lenny said, his thumbs working the controllers, destroying mordo-bots with preternatural skill as he went on, "it's Skytown. It's like some famous architectural big deal, a building with everything in it.... It has the Skymall and the, whatsit, uh, Hanging Gardens in it. That's where we live, Hanging Gardens Apartments, name's from some ancient thing I forget. . . ."

"From Babylon," Deede mumbled, watching Johansen get closer. Starting to wonder if, after all, she should point him out. But she grew more afraid with every step he took, each bringing him closer, though he was just sauntering innocently along, a tall tanned athletic man in light blue Lacrosse shirt and Dockers; short flaxen hair, pale blue eyes, much more lower lip than upper, a forehead that seemed bonily square. Very innocently walking along. Just the hint of a smirk on his face.

Where was Dad? Why didn't he come back to the car?

Don't say anything to Jean or Lenny. Jean would go back to not sleeping at night again, if she saw Johansen so close. They all knew he'd killed mom. Everyone knew but the police. Maybe they knew too

but they couldn't prove it. The coroner had ruled "accidental death."

Johansen walked up abreast Deede. She wanted to look him in the eye, and say, with that look, I *know what you did and you won't get away with it. . . .*

Their gazes met. His pale blue eyes dilated in response. His lips parted. He caught the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He looked at her —

Crumbling inside, the fear going through her like an electric shock, she looked away.

He chuckled — she heard it softly but clearly — as he walked on by.

Her mouth was dry, very dry, but her eyes spilled tears. Everything was hazy. Maybe a minute passed, maybe not so much. She was looking hard at the dashboard....

"Hanging Gardens," Lenny said, finally, oblivious to his sister's terror. "Stupid name. Makes you think they're gonna hang somebody there."

"That's why you're going to live there," Jean said, eyes glued to the TV. "Cause they going to hang you."

"So, you're gonna live there too, shrimpy."

"Little as possible," Jean responded, with a chillingly adult decisiveness.

Deede wanted to ask her what she meant by that — but Jean resented Deede's protectiveness. She'd called her, "Miss Protective three-point-eight." She resented Deede's good grades — implied she was a real kiss-ass or something, to get them. Though in fact they were pretty effortless for her. But it was true, she was too protective.

"Deede?" Dad's voice. "You okay?"

Deede blinked, wiped her eyes, looked at her Dad, opening the driver's side door, bending to squint in at her. "I'm okay," she said.

He never pushed it, hadn't since mom died. If you said you were "okay," crying or not, that was as good as could be expected. They'd all had therapy — Lenny had stopped going after a month — and it'd helped a little. And Dad probably figured it was all that could be done.

He got in and started the car and they started off. Deede looked in the mirror and she saw Johansen, way down the street, his back to them. Stopping. Turning to look after them . . .

As they drove away from their home.

This place is so huge ... so high up..." Deede, Lenny and Jean were in the observation deck of the Skytown building, up above Skytown Mall and the apartment complex, looking out at the clouds just above, the pillars and spikes of downtown LA below them. They were in the highest and newest skyscraper in Los Angeles.

"It's a hundred twenty-five stories, fifteen more than the World Trade Center buildings were," Lenny said, reading from the guide pamphlet. "Supposed to be 'super hardened' to resist terrorist attacks ..."

Deede remembered what she'd read about the Titanic, how it was supposed to be unsinkable, too. Skytown, it occurred to her, was almost a magnet for terrorists. But she wouldn't say that with Jean here, and anyway Lenny had been calling her "Deana Downer" for her frequent dour pronouncements. "Just an inch the wrong way on that steering wheel and Dad could drive us under the wheels of a semitruck," she'd told Lenny, when they were halfway to LA. Jean had been asleep — but Dad had frowned at her anyway.

"When's Dad coming back?" Deede asked, trying to see the street directly below. She couldn't see it — the "hanging gardens" were in the way: a ribbony spilling of green vines and lavender wisteria over the edges of the balconies encompassing the building under the observation deck. Closer to the building's superstructure were rose bushes too, but the building was new and so were the rose bushes, there were no blossoms on them yet. The building had a square base — filling a square city block — and rose to a ziggurat peak, a step pyramid, the lowest step of the pyramid containing the garden, the penultimate step the observation deck.

"Not till after dinner," Lenny said. "He has a meeting."

"Is this part of, what, Hanging Gardens Apartments?" Jean asked, sucking noisily on a smoothie.

"No, that's actually down," Lenny said. "This is the observation deck above Skymall. Whole thing is actually called Skytown. The apartments are under the gardens but they're called the Hanging Gardens apartments anyway, just to be more confusing."

Feeling isolated, lonely, gazing down on the tiny specks that were people, the cars looking smaller than Hot Wheels toys, Deede turned away from the window. "Let's go back to the apartment and wait for Dad."

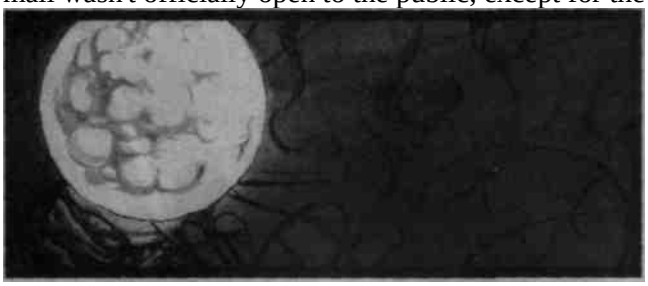
"No way!" Jean said, talking around the straw. "The apartment smells too much like paint! I want to

see the Skymall! We're supposed to have dinner there!" She sucked up the dregs of her smoothie. "And I'm still hungry."

AT FIRST IT was like any mall anywhere, though it was so high up they felt a little tired and light-headed. Deede heard a security guard talking about it to the man who ran the frozen yogurt shop — the young black guard had a peculiar uniform, dark gray, almost black, with silver epaulettes, and the shapes of snakes going around his cuffs. "Yeah man, we're so high up, the air's a little thin. They try to equalize it but it don't always go. They're working out the bugs. Like that groaning in the elevators ..."

Windows at the end of the mall's long corridors showed the hazy dull blue sky and planes going by, not that far above, and the tops of high buildings — seeing just the tops from here made them look to Deede like images she'd seen of buildings in Egypt and other ancient places.

There were only a few other customers; they were among the first to move into the building and the mall wasn't officially open to the public, except for the apartment owners.



Walking along the empty walkway between rows of glassy storefronts, Deede felt like a burglar. She had to look close to see shopkeepers inside — the ones who noticed them looked at Deede and her siblings almost plaintively. *Please give me some business so I feel like this new investment isn't hopeless and doomed to failure.*

"Sorry, Mister," she muttered, "I don't want to buy any NFL Official Logo gym bags."

"What?" Jean said. "Lenny she's mumbling to herself again."

He sniggered. "That's our Deede. Hey what's that thing?"

He pointed at a window containing a rack of objects resembling bicycle helmets crossed with sea urchins. The transparent spikes on the helmets seemed to feel them looking and reacted, retracting.

"Eww!" Jean said. "It's like critter antenna things!"

The store was called INTER-REACTIVES INC. There was a man in the back, in a green jump suit, a man shaped roughly like a bowling pin, who seemed to have a bright orange face. It must be some kind of colored light back there, Deede decided, making his face look orange. The man turned to look at them. His eyes were green — even the parts that should be "whites" were green.

"Is that guy wearing a mask?" Jean asked.

The man looked at her and a rictus-like grin jerked across his face — split it in half — and was gone. From expressionless to grin to expressionless in half a second.

Deede backed away, and turned hastily to the next store.

"That guy was all . . ." Jean murmured. But she didn't say anything more about it.

You got weird impressions sometimes in strange places, Deede decided. That's all it was.

The next shop was a Nike store. Then came a Disney store, closed. Then a store called BLENDER. Jean stopped, interested — it seemed to sell things to eat. Behind the window glass, transparent chutes curved down into blenders; dropping through the chutes, into the intermittently grinding blenders, came indeterminate pieces of organic material Deede had never seen before, bits and pieces of things: they weren't definitely flesh and they weren't recognizably fruit but they made you think of flesh and fruit — only, the colors were all wrong, the surface textures alien. Some of them seemed to be parts of brightly colored faces — which seemed to squirm in the blender so that the apparent eye would line up properly with a nose, above lips, the disjointed face looking at her for a moment before being whirred away into bits. But the parts of the faces, when she looked closer, weren't noses or eyes or lips at all. "What is that stuff?" Deede asked.

Lenny and Jean shook their heads at once, staring in puzzlement — and the blenders started whirring all at once, making the kids jump a bit. In the back of the store was a counter and someone was on the other side of the counter, which was only about four and a half feet high, but you could just see the top of the head on the other side of the counter — a lemon-colored head. The top of the head moved nervously

back and forth.

"Some kid back there," Jean said. "Walkin' back and forth."

"Or some dwarf," Lenny said. "You want to go in and see?" But he didn't move toward the shop. The other two shook their heads.

They moved on, passing an ordinary shop that sold fancy color photo portraits, a store that sold clothing for teenage girls that neither Jean nor Deede would be interested in — it was for cheerleader types — and then a store . . .

It was filled with bird cages and in the cages were birds that didn't seem to have any eyes and they seemed to have beaks covered with fur, from which issued spiral tongues. They moved around in their crowded cages so fast it was hard to tell if the impression Deede had of their appearance was right. A woman in the back of the shop had a fantastic piled-up hair style, an elaborate coif with little spheres woven into it, reminding Deede of eyes, randomly arranged into the high hairdo; she turned around . . .

She must have turned all the way around, really quickly, so quickly they didn't see the turn, because they saw only the elaborate coif and the back of her head again.

"This place is making me feel, all, sick to my stomach," Jean said.

"I think it's like . . . not enough oxygen ... or something. ..." Lenny said. Sounding like Dad in his tentative way of speaking, just then. Then more decisively: "Yo look, there's an arcade!"

They crossed into the more familiar confines of an arcade, its doorway open into a dark room, illuminated mostly by light from the various machines. "Lenny, give me a dollar!" Jean demanded.

"Stop ordering me around!" But he gave her a dollar, mashing it up in her palm, and she got a videogame machine to accept it. Deede had never seen the game before: it was called *Killer Girl*, and it appeared to show a girl — so low-rez she had no clear-cut features — shooting fiery red bullets from her eyes and the tips of her fingers and her navel — was it her navel? — toward dozens of murkily defined enemies who cropped up in the windows of a suburban neighborhood, enemies with odd-looking weapons in their pixilated hands. The neighborhood was rather like the one they'd left in Portland. As Jean played, Deede and Lenny watching, the video figure that Jean controlled changed shape, becoming more definite, more high resolution — looking more and more like Jean herself. Then a videogame "boss" loomed up over a building in the game, a giant, somewhat but not quite resembling Gunnar Johansen....

"What are you kids doing in here?"

All three of them twitched around to face him at once, as if they'd rehearsed it. A security guard was scowling at them. A man with small eyes, a flattened nose in a chunky grayish face that looked almost made of putty. He wore a peculiar, tight-fitting helmet of translucent blue, that pressed his hair down so it looked like meat in a supermarket package. There was a smell off him like smashed ants. He wore the almost-black and silver uniform with the snake cuffs.

"What you mean, what're we doing?" Lenny snorted. "Dude, it's an arcade. Work it out."

"But the mall's closed. Five minutes ago. Closes early till full public opening next month."

"So we didn't know that, okay? Now back the fuck off. Come on, Deede, Jean ..."

"My game!"

"Forget it. Come on, Deede — you too Jean, now."

The guard followed a few steps behind them as they headed for the elevators leading out of the mall — Deede thought Lenny was going to turn and hit the guy for following them, his fists clenching on rigid arms, like he did before he hit that Garcia kid — but he just muttered, "Puck this guy," and walked faster till they were in the elevator. The guard made as if to get in the elevator with them but Lenny said, "No fucking way, asshole," and stabbed the elevator "close doors" button. It shut in the guard's face, on a frozen, menacing expression that hadn't changed since he'd first spoken to them.

Jean laughed. "What a loser."

The elevator groaned as it took them down to the apartments — like it was old, not almost-new. It groaned and shivered and moaned, the sound human, heart-wrenching. Deede wanted to comfort it. The moans actually seemed to come from above it, as if someone was standing on the elevator, wailing, like a man waiting to be executed.

IT WAS A RELIEF to be back in the apartment, the doors locked, in the midst of thirty floors of housing about half way up the building: a comfortable, well-organized three-bedroom place — the bedrooms small but well ventilated. No balcony but with a view out over the city. They had cable TV, cable modems, a DVD player, big LCD screen, an X Box and a refrigerator stocked with snacks and sodas . . . and Dad finally came home with pizza. Life was pretty good that evening.

A few days later, though, Dad announced he was leaving for five days. He had an assignment for the magazine, had to fly to Vancouver, and they'd spent too much money getting here — he couldn't afford to bring the kids with him, though school was out for the summer. Jean refused to respond to the announcement with anything but a shrug; Deede found herself almost whining, asking whether this was going to be a regular thing. As a travel editor in Portland, Dad hadn't left town all that much, mostly he just edited other people's pieces. Standing at the window, a can of Diet Coke in one hand, he admitted he was going to be gone a lot in the new job.

"Yeah, well, that's just great," Lenny said, his mouth going slack with disgust, his whole frame radiating resentment — and he stuck his fists in his pockets, the way he always did when he was mad at his father, so that the seams started to pop. "I need to get my own place. I can't be babysitting all the time, Dad."

"Well, until you do, you've gotta do your part, Lenny," Dad said, gazing out the window at downtown L.A. "Just. . . just help me out this summer, while you figure out what community college you want, get a day-job, and all . . . all like that. . . . And, and you're responsible, while I'm gone, for your sisters, you have to be, I just. . . don't have time to find anyone reliable. . . ."

"Like we need him to take care of us," Jean said. "Like mom would leave us this way."

They all looked at her and she stared defiantly back. Finally Dad said, "This building is very safe, really safe ... I mean, it's high security as all hell. You have your door cards. But you shouldn't even leave the place while I'm gone if you can help it. Everything you need's here. Supermarket, clinic, it's all in the building . . . There's even a movie theater."

"It doesn't open till next week," Lenny said bitterly.

Dad cleared his throat, looked out the window again. "There are kids to meet here. . . ."

"Hardly anyone's moved in," Jean pointed out, rolling her eyes.

"Well . . ." Dad hesitated, taking a pull on his Diet Coke."... only go out in the day and .. . and don't run around in downtown L.A. Downtown L.A. is dangerous. You can go to Hollywood Boulevard and go to a movie. Lenny can drive the car, I guess. But. . . just. . . try to stay ... to stay here. ..."

His voice trailed off. He gazed out the picture window, watching a plane fly over.

She met Jorny in the Skymall when they got their iPods mixed up in the frozen yogurt shop. "Yo, girl, that's my iPod," Jorny said, as Deede picked it up from the counter. He had blue eyes that glimmered with irony in a v-shaped face, dark eyebrows that contrasted with his long, corn-rowed, sun-bleached brown hair, a tan that was partly burn. He was slender, not quite as tall as her; he wore pants raggedly cut off just above the knees, with *Anarchy? Who the fuck knows?* written on the left pants leg in blue ballpoint pen, and a way-oversized T-shirt with a picture of Nicholas Cage on it hoisting a booze bottle, from *Leaving Las Vegas.* He had various odd items twined around his wrists as improvised bracelets — twist-its worked together, individual rings of plastic cut from six-packs. He wore high topped red tennis shoes, falling apart — probably stressed from skateboarding: a well worn skateboard was jammed under his left arm.

"No it's not your iPod," Deede said, mildly. "Look, it's playing The Hives' 'Die All Right,' the song I was listening to — "

"That's the song I was listening to. I just set it down for a second to get my money out."

"No it's — oh, you're right, my iPod's in my purse. I paused it on Die All Right'. I thought I... sorry. But that really is the same song I was listening to — look! Same one — at the same time!"

"Whoa, that's weird. You're, like, stalking me and shit."

"I guess. You live in the building?"

"You kids want these frozen yogurts or what?" asked the man at the counter.

They bought their frozen yogurts, and one for Jean, who was in the Mall walkway looking in store windows. It turned out that Jorny lived downstairs from them, almost right below. He was three weeks younger than Deede and he mostly lived to do skateboard tricks. His Dad had "gone off to live in New York, we don't see him around much." When she said her mom was dead he said, "Between us we almost got one set of parents."

Jean told him she did rollerblading — he managed not to seem scornful at that — and he and Deede talked about music and the odd things they'd seen in the mall shops and how they didn't seem to be the same shops the next day. "One place seemed like it was selling faces," Jorny said. "'Latest Face'."

"I didn't see that one. They must mean masks ... or make up."

He shook his head but didn't argue and tried to show her some new skateboard ollies right there in the mall but the putty faced guard began jogging toward them from the other end of the walkway, bellowing. "You — hold it right there, don't you move!"

"Security guards everywhere hate skateboarders," Jorny declared proudly, grinning. "Fucking hate us. Come on!" He started toward a stairwell.

"Jean — come on!" Deede shouted, starting after him. Sticking her tongue out at the security guard, Jean came giggling after them as they banged through the doors into the stairwell and the smell of newly-dried paint and concrete, and descended, pounding down the stairs, laughing.

"Hey, you kids!" came the shout from above.

They kept going, Jorny at the next level down jumping a flight of stairs on his skateboard, and landing it with a joint-jarring clack. "You actually landed that!" Deede shouted, impressed — and privately a little dismayed. It was a big jump, though skateboarders did that sort of thing a lot. She was also pleased that he was evidently showing off for her.

"Yeah, huh, that was tight, I landed it!" Jorny called, clacking down the next group of stairs, ollying from one stair to the next. Jean squealed, "Agggghhh! Run! He's coming! That blue helmet weirdo's coming!"

They pounded down the stairs, easily outdistancing the security guard, and ran into the mid-level observation court and community center. They took the elevator to the Hanging Gardens, where they went to check out Jorny's place, an apartment almost identical with their own. Deede didn't want Jean to come but couldn't think of way for her not to.

Jorny's Mom was there for lunch. She was a lawyer, the director of the county Public Defender's office, a plump woman in a dress suit with a white streak in her wooly black hair, and a pleasantly Semitic face. She seemed happy to see Deede, maybe as opposed to some of the rougher people she'd seen her son with — all that was in her face, when she looked at Deede. She smiled at Deede, then glanced at Jean, looked away from her, then looked back at her, a kind of double-take, as if trying to identify what it was about the girl that worried her.

It had only just recently occurred to Deede that what she saw in other people wasn't visible to everyone. It wasn't exactly psychic — it was just what Deede thought of as "looking faster." She'd always been able to look faster.

"Come on," Jorny said, as his mom went to make them sandwiches. "I want to play you the new Wolfmother single. It's not out yet — it's a ripped download a friend of mine sent me. . . ."

THE NOTICE WAS there on Saturday morning, when Deede got up. Dad had left at six that morning, not saying goodbye — they all knew he was going to be gone several days — and he wouldn't have seen the notice, she thought. Someone had slipped it under the door from the hall. It read:

NOTICE — DUE TO SECURITY CONCERNS ONLY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL WILL BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE BUILDING THIS WEEKEND, AS OF 8 A.M, SATURDAY MORNING EXCEPT FOR DESIGNATED EMERGENCIES (SEE SKYTOWN MANUAL PAGE 39 FOR DESIGNATED EMERGENCY GUIDELINES). RESTRICTIONS WILL BE LIFTED IN A FEW DAYS — PLEASE BE PATIENT. Thank you for your cooperation. Skytown Office of Security

"What the fuck!" Lenny burst out, when Deede showed it to him. "That is totally illegal! Hey — call that kid you met, with the lawyer mom."

"Jorny?" It would be a good excuse to call him.

Jorny answered sleepily. "Whuh? My mom? She left for . . . go see my aunt for breakfast or something ... s'pose-a be back later . . . why whussup?"

"Um — check if you got a notice under your front door . . ."

He came back to the phone under a minute later. "Yeah! Same notice! My mom left after eight, though and she hasn't come back. So it must be bullshit, they must've let her go. Maybe it's a hoax. Or . . ."

"We're gonna go to the bargain matinee over on Hollywood Boulevard . . . you wanta go? I mean — then we can see if they really are making people stay. ..."

A little over an hour later they were all dressed, meeting Jorny downstairs outside the elevators at the front lobby. They walked by potted plants toward the tinted glass of the front doors . . . and found the doors locked from inside.

"You kids didn't get the notice?"

They turned to see a smiling, personable, middle-aged man standing about thirty feet away. He wore a green suit-and-tie — maybe that was why his face had a vague greenish cast to it. Just a reflection off the green cloth. Behind him were two security guards in the peculiar uniforms.

"That notice is bullshit," Lenny said flatly. "Not legal."

"You look a little young to be a lawyer," said the man in the green suit mildly.

"Your face is sort of green," Jean said, staring at him.

But as she said it, his face seemed to shift to a more normal color. As if he'd just noticed and changed it somehow.

"Or not. . ." Jean mumbled.

The man ignored her. "My name is Arthur Koenig — I'm the building supervisor. I'm pretty sure of the laws and rules, and I assure you kids, you cannot leave the building except under designated emergency conditions. . . ."

"And I'm pretty sure," Jorny said, snapping his skateboard up with his foot to catch it in his hand, "that's what they call 'false imprisonment' — it's a form of kidnap."

The security guards both had the odd translucent-blue helmets. They stood behind and to either side of Koenig — one of them, who might've been Filipino, stepped frowning toward Jorny. "That's the boy

who was doing the skateboarding in the Mall — I saw him on the cameras. Boy — you give me that skateboard, that's contraband here!"

"Not a fucking chance, a-hole," Jorny said, making Jean squeal with laughter. "Come on," he said to Lenny, " — well go to my place and call around about this. . . ."

"Building phone line's being worked on," said Koenig pleasantly. "Be down for a while. Building cable too."

"We've got cell phones, man," Lenny said, turning toward the elevators. "Come on, you guys. .. ."

As they went back to the elevators, Deede glanced over her shoulder, saw that Koenig was following, at a respectful distance — and while they were walking at an angle, the shortest way to the elevator, he seemed to be following a straight line — then he turned right, and she realized he was following the lines of the square sections of floor. And she saw something coming off his right heel — a thin red cord, or string, like a finely stretched-out piece of flesh, that came from a hole in his shoe and went into the groove between the floor tiles.

A thread, stuck to his shoe, is all, she told herself. It's not really a connection to something inside the floor.

"That skateboard!" The blue-helmeted security guard yelled, following Jorny. "Leave it here! I'm confiscating it!"

But Koenig reached out, put his hand on the guard's arm. "Let him go. It doesn't matter now. Let him keep it for the moment."

Deede followed the others into the elevator. She didn't mention the red cord to them.

Yes, this is 911 emergency. May I have your name and address..." Lenny gave his name and address and then said, "I'm calling because we're being held against our will by the weirdos in this building we live in. The manager, all these people — no one's allowed to leave the building! It's totally illegal!"

"Slow down, please," said the dispatcher, her voice crackling in the cell phone, phasing in and out of clarity. "Who exactly is 'restraining' you?"

The skepticism was rank in her voice.

"The building security people say we can't leave, no one can leave, there're hundreds of people who live here and we can't — "

"Was there a bomb scare?"

"I don't know, they didn't say so, they just said 'security concerns'. ..."

"The security at that building interfaces with the police department. If they're asking people not to leave it's probably so they can investigate something. Have they been . . . oh, violent or . . ."

"No, not yet, but they... look, it's false imprisonment, it's ..."

"They *are* security. Well have someone call them — but they're probably doing this for your protection. Could be a Homeland Security drill — "

"Oh, Jesus, forget it." He broke the connection and threw the cell phone so it bounced on the sofa cushion. "I can't believe it. They just assumed I was full of crap."

Jorny was on his own cell phone, listening. He frowned and hung up. "I can't get my mom to answer, or my aunt."

"Jorny ..." said Deede thoughtfully, looking out the apartment's picture window at the smog-hazy sky. "You think maybe they stopped your mom — took her into custody 'cause she tried to leave?"

Jorny stared at her. "No way." He shot to his feet. "Come on, if you're coming. I'm gonna ask if she's at the security office."

Deede looked at Lenny to see if he was coming
but he was on the cell phone again, trying to call
Dad. "I'm gonna call Dad . . . he's not picking up,
though ___ "

"Lenny — where's Jean?" Deede asked, looking around. It wasn't like Jean to be so quiet.

"Hm? She left. She said she's going to that coffee lounge where those kids hang out. . . ."

"What kids?"

"I don't know. She started hanging with them yesterday sometime. She came back at three in the morning. I think she was, like, stoned. . . ."

"What? I'm gonna go get her. And help Jorny." She called this to Lenny as she followed Jorny out the door. Lenny waved her on.

ANOTHER NOTICE HAD been taped up on the wall next to the elevator call buttons.

NOTICE —
ELEVATOR MOVEMENT HAS BEEN
RESTRICTED TO THE UPPER SEVENTY
FLOORS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.
ELEVATOR WILL NOT DESCEND
FROM THIS LEVEL.
Thank you for your cooperation.

"What the fuck!" Jorny said, gaping at the sign.

"I wouldn't have put it that way," said a white-haired older woman standing a few steps away; she had thick, horn-rimmed glasses and a long blue dress. "But that's generally my feeling too..." She had her purse over her shoulder, as if she had planned to go out. "I was going to Farmer's Market but ... I guess not now. . . ." The woman went back toward the doors to the apartment complex, shaking her head.

Jorny shook his head as the woman walked away. "Everyone just accepts it."

"Security office is downstairs," Deede said. "We can't get to it on the elevators. But we could take the stairs. . . . Only, I want to find my sister. But then she could be down there, too. . . ."

He was already starting toward the door to the stairwell, skateboard under his arm — you can't skateboard on carpet.

But the stairwell door was locked. "What about the fire laws and all that?" Jorny said, wondering aloud. He looked toward a fire alarm, as if thinking of tripping it. Deede hoped he wouldn't.

"Okay," he said, "let's go upstairs on the elevators to that lounge, see if we can find some way from there to go down. There must be a way — the security guards must be able to do it."

"I wanta get my brother to go with us. . . ."

They went back to the apartment, and found the apartment door standing open.

Inside there was a lamp knocked over. And Lenny was gone. He'd left his cell phone where he'd thrown it and he was just... gone. She looked through all the rooms and called up and down the halls. No response except a Filipino man looked out a door briefly — then hastily shut it when Deede tried to ask him a question. They heard him lock it.

"I'm sure he's okay," Jorny said.

Deede looked reproachfully at him. "I didn't say he wasn't."

"You looked worried."

"I . . . I'm worried about Jean and . . . this whole weird thing. That's all. Lenny gets in a snit sometimes and goes off and says 'Screw everybody' and wanders away .. . gets somebody to buy him beer somewhere and he gets a little smashed and then he comes home. But leaving the door open that way . . ."

Jorny was on his cell again, trying to call his mom. He called his aunt, spoke to her for less than a minute in low tones — and hung up. "She never showed up. She was supposed to meet my aunt — and she never got there."

"It's too soon to call it a 'missing persons' thing. We could look for your mom in the building. And Jean."

"You want to try the lounge?" Jorny asked. She nodded and they went to the elevators and rode up toward the lounge. On the way he tried to call his mom on the cell phone again — and gave up. "Doesn't work at all now. Just static."

"There are places in the elevators for keys," Deede said, pointing at the key fixture under the floor tabs. "The security guards must have keys that let them go to restricted floors . . ."

That's when the moaning started up again, in the elevators above them — and below them too. As if the one down below were answering the one above. A moan from above, the ceiling shivering; an answering moan from below the elevator, the floor resonating.

Jorny looked at her quizzically, but saying nothing.

They got out at the coffee lounge, a big, comfortable cafeteria space spanning most of one side of the floor, with a coffee shop and a magazine stand. Both were closed. But there were kids there, about nine of them, five boys and four girls, middle-school like Jean, in a far corner, crowded together in a circle near the rest rooms.

Deede hurried closer and found they were standing in a tight circle around Jean, circling, and each one pointing an index finger at her, one after the other, like they were doing "the wave", the fingers

rippling out and pointing and dropping in the circle, and each one pointing said, "Take a hit."

"Take a hit ___ "

"Take a hit ___ "

"Take a hit.. . ."

Like that, on and on around the circle, and when Deede and Jorny got there, Deede looked to see what Jean was taking a hit of, what drug or drink, but there was nothing there, no smoke, no smell, no pipe, no bottle, only the pointing fingers from the rapt, feral faces *of* the other kids, their eyes dilated, their lips parted, saying, "Take a hit, take a hit, take a hit ..." And Jean was swaying in place, rocking back, staggering in reaction from each pointed finger, each 'take a hit', her eyes droopy, her mouth droopier, looking decidedly stoned. Was she playacting?

"What're you guys hitting on?" Jorny said, laughing nervously.

All nine of them turned their heads at once to look at them. "You can't join," the tallest of the boys said. An acned face, a spiky hair cut. "You can't. You're not trustworthy."

"We don't want to," Deede said. She waved urgently at her sister. "Come on, Jean — let's go. There's some weird stuff going on _____ We've gotta find Lenny."

Jean shook her head. She was swaying there, hyperventilating. "I'm not feeling any pain at all and I'm between the suns . .. I'm not going, going to stay here. . . ."

"Jean — come on!" Deede tried to push through the circle — and someone, she wasn't sure who, shoved her back, hard, so she fell painfully on her back. "Ow!"

"This way," said the big kid with the acned face, leading the group around Jean into the men's room, taking Jean with them. Both males and females filed, without a word or hesitation, into the men's bathroom.

Jorny helped Deede up. "That was fucked up," he said, shaking his head in disgust. "I'm going in there."

"I'm going too. I don't care if it's the men's room . . . They took my sister in there." "She went on her own. But fuck it, let's go."

He led the way into the men's room — which was empty.

Not a soul in it. Jorny even opened the toilet booths. No one. There was only one entrance. There was no way out of the bathroom except the one door. There were no ventilation shafts. There was just the big, over-lit, blue-tiled and stainless steel bathroom and their own reflections in the mirrors over the metal sinks.

Jorny gaped around. "Okay, what uh . . ." His voice seemed emptied of life in the hard space of the room. "We were right in front of that door. They didn't get out past us. . .."

"Look!" She pointed at the mirrors. They were reflected in a continuum of mirrors, as when mirrors are turned to mirrors. Only, there was only one set of mirrors on one wall. There were no mirrors opposite — yet the reflection was the mirror-images-with-in-mirror-images telescoping that happened only if you turned mirrors to mirrors. And Deede saw hundreds of Deedes and Jornys stretched into infinity, each face looking lost and shocked and scared.

Lost and shocked and scared endlessly repeated, amplified.

And then she saw Jean in the mirrors, about thirty reflections down the glassy corridor, passing from one side to the other, glancing at her as she went past.

"Jean!" She turned from the mirror, looked the other way as if she might see Jean throwing the reflection there — but saw nothing but a row of toilet booths and urinals. She looked back at the mirrors. "Jorny — did you see someone in the mirrors beside us?"

Jorny's endlessly repeated reflections nodded to her. "Thought I saw your sister."

Feeling dizzily sick, Deede turned away. "It's like there's another room in this room. . . ."

She noticed an outline, about the size of a door, on the farther wall between the urinals and the corner, etched with what looked like red putty along the joins in the tiles. She walked over to it. "There's a door-shaped mark here, but . . ." She touched the puttied areas. "This gunk is hard, like it's been this way a long time. ... It couldn't be where they got out. ..." Jorny came over and battered at the marked section of wall with his skateboard; they pushed at tiles but could find no way of opening the door, if it was a door. And when they touched it there was a sensation like a very weak electric shock — not enough to make them jump but just enough to give a feeling of discomfort. Electrical discomfort — and the hairs rising on the back of their necks. And chills too, sick chills like you get with the flu. "It's like a warning," she whispered. "Come on — I want out of here. . . ."

Jorny nodded, seeming relieved, and they hurried out of the men's room, back into the lounge area —

where they were entirely alone. "I've been thinking about some of the shops we saw," Deede said, as they walked over to the elevators and the door to the stairwell. The stairway door was locked. "And — it was like something was influencing stuff around here, something changing the way things . . . just the way they are." Should she tell him about the cord connecting Koenig's foot to the floor tiles?

"I know what you mean," Jorny said absently, as he fiddled with the door to the stairway. "Locked. But yo — that door's open. . . ."

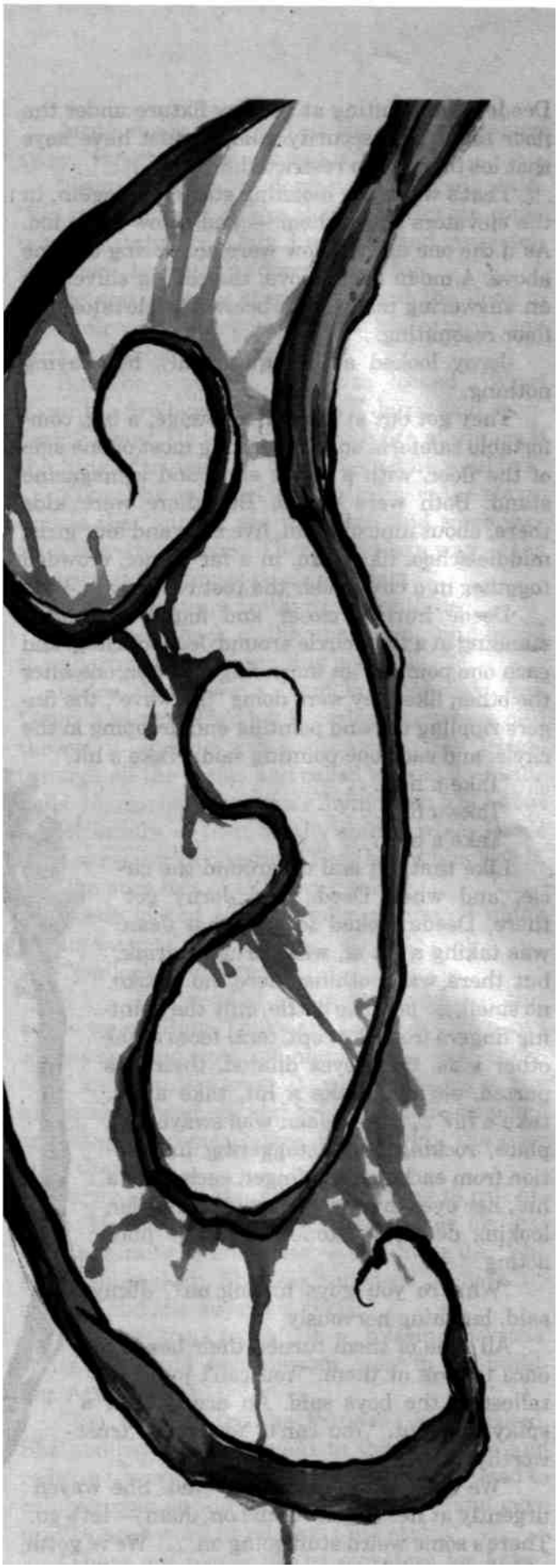
The door he was pointing at, between the stairs and elevator, was marked Maintenance 47-17. It looked like it hadn't quite closed — like the doorframe was slightly crooked and it had stuck with the door just slightly ajar. You had to look close to see it was open.

She went to it and put her hand on the knob.

Jorny whispered, "Be careful... you could end up locking it. "

She nodded and turned the knob while pulling hard on the door — and it swung open.

Inside, it was an ordinary closet, containing a new vacuum cleaner with the price tag still on it, and bottles of cleaning fluid, all of them full, and a push broom . .. and another smaller door, in the wall of the closet to the right. She bent over and turned the little chrome handle it had in place of a knob — and it opened onto the stairway. "Cool! Come on!"



Hunching down to fit, they went through — and found themselves in the main stairway. It was dimly lit, echoing with their every movement, a smell of rot overlaying the smell of new concrete and paint.

"Smells like road kill," Jorny said. He turned to look at the door they'd come through — which shut behind them into the wall, hardly showing a seam."Weird that they put that door there. . . ."

"It's for them, to use — in case of emergency," Deede said. "And don't ask who they are — I don't know."

"Deede — there's something moving down there . . . and it doesn't seem like people."

She leaned over the balcony and looked. Something slipped across the space between flights about four stories down — a transparent dull-red flipper . . . feeler . . . tentacle? She couldn't get a clear visual picture of it from where she stood. But it was big — maybe three feet across and very long. Slipping by, like a giant boa constrictor. She could just make out that it was connected to something bigger, something that stretched down the open space between the descending flights of stairs. . . .

And as it moved she heard the familiar moaning. That sobbing despair.

She stepped back and said, "Jorny — punch me in the shoulder."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I'm not dreaming. But only pretty sure. So go ahead and — ow!"

"You said to! Okay — do me now. Right there. Stick out your knuckle so it — shit!"

"So what do you think?" he asked, rubbing his shoulder, wincing. "Damn, you hit hard for a girl."

"That's sexist. And I think we're awake. We have to decide."

He surprised her by suddenly sitting down on the steps, and taking a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. "I've been trying not to smoke. Promised my mom I'd give it up. , . ." He took a wooden match out with the cigarette and flicked it alight on his skateboard — Deede thought it was an admirably cool thing to do. He lit the cigarette, and puffed. "But right now I don't care what my mom thinks about cigarettes."

"So what're we gonna do?" She was thinking of going back to the apartment again and seeing if Lenny had come home. She'd made excuses for him, but under the circumstances she thought he'd have left her a note or something if he'd left. . . voluntarily.

Don't think about Lenny, too, she thought, sitting on a step a little below Jorny. One person at a time. Get Jean. She's younger. He's older and he can take care of himself.

Jorny was blowing smoke rings, and poking at them with his finger — he was absentmindedly running his skateboard back and forth on its wheels with one foot. "One time two or three years ago," he said, his voice a dreamy monotone, "when my Dad was still living with us, I was worried about where he was all day. See, he was a photographer, and he worked at home. So he was usually there. But one summer he just started being gone all day and there was a lot of ... I dunno, him and my mom were arguing all the time about little things. About bullshit. Like there was something else . . . but they weren't saying. I was feeling like he was doing something — and it was gonna make them break up. So anyway I followed him. I didn't even think about why. I borrowed my sister's car — she's moved out now — and I followed him . . . and he didn't notice I was following. He was really into where he was going, man. And he went to a motel. I should've left it there but I saw which room he went to and after awhile I went up and they had the windows curtained but there was a place where if you bent over and looked, at the corner, you could see in. . . ."

"Oh Christ, Jorny."

"Yeah. And he was doin' it with some woman I never saw before. They had champagne and stuff. Later on he left my mom for her. ..."

"That must've been ..." She couldn't keep from making a face. "It was. I wished I hadn't gone, wished I hadn't looked. It's different, really seeing it. Worse. He was still married to my mom, and . . . Anyway, since then, I figure there's things I don't want to find out about. And if we go looking down there, we'll see things we don't want to know about." He flicked his cigarette away half smoked. "And — I'm not scared. Not that much. I just. . . don't want to see anything else that I don't want to know about. . . especially since my mom might be any one of a million places."

"But..." Deede heard the moaning again from below. She just wanted to go back to the apartment, and wait there with the doors locked. But that hadn't helped Lenny. . . .

"You okay?" Jorny asked, looking at her closely.

"I'm just worried about my brother. And Jean. I'd like to go back to the apartment, but. . ." She sighed. "No one did anything about my Mom being killed. No one... no one pursued it." Deede felt her hands fisting — and she couldn't prevent it. "They said it was suicide or an accident. But there was a man who scares people — he was following some girls in the neighborhood, and there's rumors about him — and

he was there that day, he was seen on the same trails, and then there was the dream. The dream seemed almost as real as ... as today is."

"What dream?"

"It was one of those dreams you get over and over — but the first time I got it was the morning my mom was killed. She was out jogging early and I was still asleep. Our house was out on the edge of town, by this sorta woodsy area with an old quarry. And in my dream I saw her jogging along the edge of the old quarry, where there's this little pond, jogging like she always does on the trails there, and I saw Gunnar Johansen watching her and he looks like he's been up all night, he's sort of swaying there, and then he starts following her and then starts running and she turns and sees him and stumbles and falls on the trail and then he throws himself on her and she struggles and hits him, and he laughs and he knocks her out and then he . . . plays with her body kind of, with one hand on her throat, squeezing and the other hand in his pants, and then she kicks him in the groin and he gives a yell and picks her up and throws her down in the quarry, and she falls face down and she hits hard in that shallow water down there. And . . . bubbles come up. . . . And that's exactly how they found her."

"They found her like that, in that exact place? And you hadn't heard about it yet?"

Deede nodded. "I tried to tell them but they said dreams don't count in court. And I had that dream again, I had it a lot ... I was afraid to go to sleep for a long time. . . ."

She put her face in her hands and he came and sat close beside her, not touching her, just being there with her. She appreciated that — the sensitivity of it. Him not trying to put his arm around her. But coming to be right there with her.

A few seconds more, and then a moan and a long, drawn-out scraping sound came from below. Deede decided she had to make up her mind. "I have to go down there. No one found out about my Mom — I'm going to find out about Jean. You can go back."

He cleared his throat. Then muttered, "Fuck it." Nodded to himself. He stood up and offered his hand to help her up. "Okay. Come on."

They descended. Jorny carried his skateboard for two turns, and then decided to do a jump, as if some kind of oblique statement of defiance of whatever waited below, and he jumped a whole flight — and the skateboard splintered under him when he came down, snapped in half, and he ended up sliding on his ass. "Shit, goddamnit!"

She helped him up this time. "Sorry about your skateboard. You going to save the trucks?"

"I don't know. I guess ..." Disgustedly carrying half a skateboard in each hand, he led the way downward — and they stopped another floor lower, to peer over the concrete rail. . . .

Something slipped scrapily by thirty-five feet below, something rubbery and transparently pinkish-red ... it made her think of the really big pieces of kelp you saw at the shore, thickly transparent like that, but redder, bigger — and this one had someone swallowed up in it: one of the kids, a young boy she'd seen in the lounge. The boy was trapped inside the supple tree-trunk-thick flexible tube, trapped alive, squeezed but living, slightly moving, eyes darting this way and that, hands pressed by the constriction against his chest. .. and moaning, making the despairing moan they'd been hearing, somehow louder than it should be, as if the thing that held him was triumphantly amplifying his moan.

"You see that?" Jorny whispered.

She nodded. "One of those kids . . . who was with Jean ... in a ... I don't know what it is. . . ." And then it moaned again, so loudly the cry echoed up the shaft of the stairway.

It's calling to us, she thought. It's luring us — saying, "Come and save him, come and save them all. . . . Come down and see. . . ."

And the slithering thing, connected to something below, itself descended — or, more rightly, was pulled down — ahead of her and Jorny, themselves going down and down, the light diminishing ever so subtly toward the lower floors. The transparent red tubule drew itself down, like an eel drawing itself into a hole, pulling the boy — and others, too, squirming trapped human figures glimpsed for a moment enveloped in other thick tendrils, moaning, down and down. Did she see Jean, caught down there? Deede wasn't sure. But she felt that sick flu-chills feeling again and she wanted to turn and run up the stairs and —

"I saw my mom down there," Jorny said, his voice cracking. Inside that thing. "Now I've really got to go."

Deede wanted to run. Don't let them scare you into not going. She almost thought she heard her mom's voice saying it. Almost. He needs someone to go with him. And Jean . . . don't forget Jean. . ..

"Okay," Deede made herself say. She started down, following the slithering descender . . . following the moans and the moaners, following the trapped squirmers. . . .

Down and down . . . till they got to the dimly lit bottom floor. And to the basement door.

Deede had expected to find the squirming thing at the bottom but it wasn't there, though there was a thin coating of slushy red material on the floor, like something you'd squeeze from kelp but the color of diluted blood . . . surrounding the closed basement door. The thing had gone through the door — and closed it behind .. .

She half hoped the door was locked. Jorny tried it — and it opened. He stood in the doorway, outlined in green light. She looked over his shoulder. . . .

About forty feet by thirty, the basement room contained elevator machinery — humming hump shaped units to the right — and cryptic pipes along the ceiling. But what drew their eyes was a jagged hole in the floor, right in front of the door, about seven feet across, edged with red slush — the green light came from down there. From within the hole.

She followed Jorny into the room, and — Deede taking a deep breath — they both bent over to look. ...

Below was a chamber that could never have been made by the builders of Skytown. It was a good-sized chamber, very old. Its stones were rough-carved, great blocks set by some ancient hand in primeval times, way pre-Columbian. Grooves had been carved in the stone floor by someone with malign and fixed intentions. They were flecked with a red-brown crust that had taken many years to accumulate.

"It looks to me like they dug this building in real deep," Jorny said, in a raw whisper. "I heard they dug the foundation down deeper than any other building in Los Angeles. And ... I guess there was

something down there, buried way down, they didn't know about. . . ."

She nodded. He looked at the fragments of skateboard in his hand and tossed them aside, with a clatter, then got down on his knees, and lowered himself. . .

"Jorny!" . . . through the hole in the floor; into the green light; into the ancient chamber.

"Oh fuck," she groaned. But she lowered herself and dropped too, about eight feet to a stinging impact on the balls of her feet.

Jorny caught and steadied her as she was about to tip over and they looked around. "Some kind of temple!" he whispered. "And that thing..."

The grooves cut into the naked bedrock of the floor, each about an inch deep, were part of a spiral pattern that filled the floor of the entire room — and the gouged pattern was reproduced on the ceiling, as was the dais, the spirals, above and below, converging on the circular dais and the translucent thing that dwelt at the room's center. Spiral patterns on ceiling, spiral patterns on floor, between them, a thing hung suspended in space — suspended between the space of the room and the space between worlds: an enormous, gelatinous) transparent sphere containing a restless collection of smaller iridescent spheres, like a clutch of giant fish eggs — were they smaller than the encompassing sphere, or were they of indefinite size, perhaps both as small as bushels and as big as planets? The iridescent spheres shifted restlessly inside the enveloping globe, changing position, as if each sphere was jostling to get closer to the outside of the container, the whole emanating a murky-green light that tinted the stone walls to jade; the light was a radiance of intelligence, a malign intelligence — malevolent relative to the needs and hopes of human beings — and somehow Deede knew that it was aware of her and wanted to consume her mind with its own . . . She could feel its mind pressing on the edges of her consciousness, pushing, leaning, feeling like a glacier that might become an avalanche.

And then as her eyes adjusted she saw what the green glow had hidden, till now — its extensions, green but filled with diluted blood, stolen blood, the tentacles stretching from the sphere-of-spheres like stems and leaves from a tuber, but prehensile, mobile, stretching out from thick tubules to gradually narrow, to thin, very thin tips that stretched out red cords, like fishing line up into the grooves on the ceiling, and from there into minute cracks, and, she knew — with an intuitive certainty — up high into the building, where they reached into people, taking control of them one by one, starting with those who'd been here longest, Skytown's employees. And some of the tentacular extensions had swallowed up whole people, drawn them down and into itself, so that they squirmed in the tubes, dozens of them, shifting in and out of visibility . . . She saw Koenig, drawn down in one of the transparent tentacles, sucked through it, his face contorted with a terrible realization . . . blood squeezing in little spurts from his eyes, his mouth, his nose . . . And then he was jetted back up the tentacle, becoming smaller as he went, transformed into transmissible form that could be reconstituted up above. . . . And all this she glimpsed in less than two seconds.

Visibility was a paradox, a conundrum — the tentacles were visible as a whole but not individually, when you tried to look at one it shifted out of view, and you just glimpsed the people trapped inside it before it was gone. And the moaning filled the room, only they heard it more in their minds than in their ears. . . .

"It's like this thing is here but it's not completely here," Jorny said, wonderingly. "Like it's . . . getting to be more and more here as it . . ."

"The people look pale, some of them like they're dying or dead," Deede said, feeling dreamlike and sick at once. "I can't see them clear enough to be sure, but it's like they're being drained real slow. ..."

Jorny said, "It's not coming at us . . . Why?"

"It's waiting," she said. It was more than guessing — it felt right. The answers were in the air itself, somehow; they throbbed within the murky green light. Her fast-seeing drew them quickly into her. "It wants us to come to it. It's lured the others in some way — we saw how it lured Jean. Everyone's been lured. It wants you to submit to it. . . ."

"Look — there's something on the other side. . . ."

"Jorny? How are we going to get out of here? There's no way back up. . . ."

"There has to be another entrance."

"Okay — fine." She felt increasingly reckless — she felt so hopeless now that it felt like little was left to lose. She led the way herself — she was tired of following males from one place to the next — and edged around the boiling, suspended sphere-of-spheres, getting closer to it and learning more about it with proximity. . : .

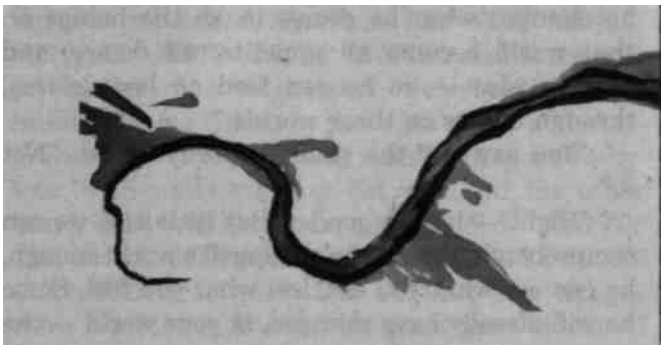
It was only partly in their space; it was in many spaces at once. There was only one being: each

sphere they were seeing was another manifestation of that same being, one for each world it stretched into. It slowly twisted things in those worlds to fit its liking. And they were only seeing the outside of it, like the dorsal fin of a shark on the surface of the water. It had many names, in many places; many varieties of appearance, many approaches to getting what it wanted. Its true form —

"Look!" Jorny said, pointing past her at a jagged hole in the floor — a hole that was the exact duplicate of the one in the ceiling they'd dropped through on the other side of the room. Its edges were shaped precisely the same. . . .

The tentacular probes of the sphere-of-spheres teased at them as they passed, almost caressing them, offering visions of glory, preludes of unimaginable pleasure. ...

But the creature frightened her, more than it attracted her — it was somehow scarier for its enticements. It was as malevolent to her as a wolf spider would be to a crawling fly. Or as a Venus fly trap would be. . . .



"Jesus!" Jorny blurted, hastening away from the thing. "I almost . . . never mind, just get over here!"

She wanted to follow him. But it was hard to move — she was caught up in its whispering, its radiance of promise, and the undertone of warning. Run from me and I'll be forced to grab you! Jorny ran to her and grabbed her wrist, pulled her away from it. She felt weak, for a moment, drained, staggering. . . .

He knelt by the hole in the floor and dropped through. "Come on, Deede!"

After a moment she followed — almost falling through the hole in her weariness. He half caught her, as before — and she felt her strength returning, away from the sphere-within-spheres.

"Look — we're on the ceiling!" Jorny burst out. "Aren't we?"

They were on a floor — with pipes snaking around their knees — but above them was the machinery of the elevators, affixed upside down on . . . the ceiling. Or — on the floor that was now their ceiling. There was a door, identical to the one they'd come through to find the hole into the temple room above — but it went from a couple feet above the floor to the ceiling. The knob seemed in the wrong place. The door was related to the ceiling the way any other door would be related to the floor — it was upside down. Jorny went to it and jumped to the knob, twisted it, pulled the door open, and scrambled through, turned to help her climb up ... and then he yelped as he floated upward. . . . They both floated up, tumbling in the air. . . .

They were floating in space for a moment, turning end over end, in the bottom level of the stairway they'd come down. It was the very same stairway, with the occasional cabinet with fire extinguishers and floor-numbers painted on the walls — only, it stretched down below them, instead of up above them. They instinctively reached for a railing; Jorny caught it. . . .

A nauseating twist, a feeling of turning inside-out and back right-side out again, and then they were standing on the stairway, which once more was zig-zagging upward, above them. Only — it couldn't be. It had been below the temple room. Or had they been somehow transported back above?

"What the fuck ..." Jorny said, pale, fumbling for a cigarette with shaking hands. "Damn, out of smokes. ..."

Deede stared. Someone was up above — crawling down the walls toward them. Two some-ones. A man and woman. Coming down the walls that contained the stairs, crawling like bugs, upside down relative to Deede. . . .

"Jorny — look!"

"I see 'em."

"Jorny, I don't know how much more I can . .."

"I'm not feeling so good either. But you know what? We're surviving. Maybe for a reason, right? Hey

— they look . . . familiar."

They were about thirty-five, a man and woman dressed in what Deede could only describe, to herself, as dark, clinging rags. The man had a backpack of some kind tightly fixed to his shoulders. They approached, crawling down the wall, and Deede and Jorny backed away, trying to decide where to run to — up the stairs past them? And then the strangers stopped, looking at them upside down, the woman's hair drooping down toward them. . . .

And the woman spoke. "Jorny — it's us, me and you as kids!"

"What — from earlier, somehow? But we never discovered the temple as kids!" said the man. "We just found out about it last year!"

"They're us in one of the other worlds — younger versions . . . and they found their way here! Just like in my dream, Jorny! I told you, there was something here — something that would help us!"

Jorny — the younger Jorny standing at the younger Deede's side — shook his head, stunned. "It's us — in, like, the future or . . ."

Deede nodded. "Would you guys come down and . . . stand on the level we're on? Or can you?"

"We can," the older Deede said. "The rules shifted when Yog-Sothoth altered the world, and gravity moves eccentrically."

She crept toward the floor, put one foot on it, then sidled around on the wall like a gecko, finally getting both feet on the floor and standing to face them; the older Jorny did the same. His blond hair was cut short and beginning to recede, his face a trifle lined, but he was still recognizably Jorny.

Deede found she was staring at the older version of herself in fascination. She seemed more proportional, more confident, if a bit grim — there were lines around her eyes, but it looked good on

her. But the whole thing was disorienting — was something she didn't really want to see. It made her want to hide, seeing herself, just as much as seeing the thing in the temple.

"Don't look so scared, kid," the older Jorny said, smiling sadly at her.

Deede scowled defiantly at him. "Just — explain what the hell you are. I don't think you're us."

"We're another you," the older Deede said. "And we're connected with you. We all extend from the ideal you, in the world of ideas. But this sure isn't that world.... Time is a bit in advance in our world, I guess, from yours, for one thing. . . ."

"Come on with us," the older Jorny said. "Well show you. Then we can figure out if there's a way we can work together . .. against him."

They turned and climbed the stairs — after a moment's hesitation, Jorny and Deede followed. They went up eleven flights, past battered, rusting doors. "Your building," the older Deede said, "extends downward from ours — but to you it will seem upward. Ours is downward from yours. They're mirrored, but not Opposites — just variants at opposite poles from one another. Me and Jorny found out that the primary impulses were coming from the basement of our building so we cut the hole in the sub basement floor — that's the ceiling of the other room."

"I think it's the other way around," said the older Jorny.

"I don't know, it depends. Anyway the Great Appetite — that's what we call it, though some call it Yog-Sothoth — he reaches out through the many worlds through that same temple . . . and he changes what he comes to, so the beings on that world become all appetite, all desire, and nothing else — so he can feed on low desires, through beings on those worlds."

"You say *he?"* the younger Jorny asked. "Not *it?"*

"Right — he has gender. But little else we can comprehend. Once he's changed a world enough, he can eat what you eat, feel what you feel. Some he will already have changed, in your world — the rest he will change later. He changed our world about eighteen years ago. We've resisted — but most people don't. They get changed — the Great Appetite removes whatever there is in them that checks appetites and desires and impulses. Any kind of strong controlling intelligence, he takes it out. Makes psychopaths of some people, and zombies of just feeding, of different kinds, of others — "

"Like Gunnar Johansen!" Deede burst out.

The older Deede stopped on a landing and turned to look at her. "Yes," she said gravely. "He killed my mother too — before the Great Appetite took over. Like him. He was already under Yog-Sothoth's control . . . without knowing it."

She looked like she wanted to embrace the younger Deede — but Deede was afraid of her, and took a step back.

The older Deede shrugged and turned to follow the older Jorny through a doorway — the door at this landing had been wrenched aside, was leaning, crumpled against the wall, hinges snapped. They passed through and found themselves in the lower Mezzanine lounge, exactly like the one they'd left — sterile in its furnishings and design.

They walked over to the window and stared out at the world — the transformed world.

There was no sky. Instead there was a ceiling, high up, just above the tallest building, that stretched to the horizon. And the ceiling was covered with images, enticing objects and enticing bodies flashing by and intermingling and overlapping. She saw an advertisement for *BLENDER* — and the indeterminate segments of fleshy material that she'd seen in the Skymall shop window; she saw an ad for something called *BRAIN BLANKER*, "for really changing your child — remake it exactly as you please!"; she saw an ad for *INTER-REACTIVES, INC*, the sea urchin helmets she'd seen in Skymall; she saw an ad that said simply, *WE ELIMINATE PROBLEM NEIGHBORS — GOVERNMENT CERTIFIED AGAINST RETALIATION*, another ad asked, *WANT A PET THAT REALLY SCREAMS? ORDER 'LITTLE PEOPLE'!* and there was an image of a frightened, dwarf-sized semi-human figure lifted by its neck from a "home-grow vat" — by a grinning man holding a two-by-four with nails sticking out of it, in his other hand; there was an ad *for LATEST FACE - THE TOP TEN FACES, WITH NEAR-INSTANTANEOUS TRANSFER GUARANTEED, AT REDUCED PRICES*. The images were sometimes blurred by great gray clouds of smog — clouds pierced by people who flew through them, people mechanically enhanced to fly, their bodies pierced by pistons and wires, shrieking as they went; other people crawled up and down the sides of buildings like bugs; clusters of junk material floated by, clouds of metal with people clinging to them, wailing and tittering and fornicating; unspeakably fat people drifted by on flying cushions tricked out with pincers and mechanical hands; emaciated people drifted by too: their heads penetrated by wires, their faces twitching with pleasures they no longer really felt, their vehicles suddenly spurting with speed to deliberately crash headlong into other vehicles, going down in spinning, flaming wreckage to join the accumulation of twisted metal and weather-beaten trash that filled the streets hundreds of feet deep, black with insects. . . .

"That's pretty much the way the whole world looks," the older Jorny said, his voice cracking. "There are attempts at changing it, in places — but the influence of the Great Appetite is too strong.. . unless you have with you —" He turned to his younger self. "— what you are supposed to have."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You have something I need. . . ." The older Jorny took off his backpack, and took out a boxy device that had speakers at both ends, like a boombox, but no place to put in CDs or an iPod — only a small recess at one end. "You see? It goes here"

"You're expecting something from us?" Deede asked, confused.

The older Deede looked out the window. "When we found the locus of the Great Appetite, in the temple, we found I had a kind of... a sensitivity to it. I could pick up information from it. By something I think of as 'looking fast'."

Deede nodded. "I'm like that too."

"I saw you, then — saw that you were coming and that you carried something the Great Appetite is afraid of. A many-voiced note of refusal."

"A what?"

"Do you have a recording device with you?"

Jorny stared at them . . . then slowly reached into his pocket and drew out his iPod.

The older Deede frowned. "That's not what I saw. . ."

"It's inside it!" The older Jorny said. He snatched the iPod from Jorny's hand and — ignoring Jorny's protests — smashed it again and again on the metal window frame till it burst open.

"There it is!" The older Deede shouted, pointing at the wrecked device. "That thing!"

"It's a microdrive!" the older Jorny said excitedly. "We use them to make sounds too — but we put them directly in our sound machines. We have only sounds that have been appropriated, co-opted by the Great Appetite. Now . . ."

"This better work," Jorny grumbled.

The older Jorny plucked the microdrive from the wreckage and pressed it in the recess of the alternate

boombox. It fit neatly in place. He hit a switch and the box boomed out — with a roaring cacophony.

"Shit!" the younger Jorny yelled, reaching over to snap the boombox off again. "It's not picking out any one song — it sounds like it's playing all of them at once! There's more than a thousand songs in there!"

"So that's it. . . ." the older Deede murmured. She looked at the older Jorny. "Remember? 'A thousand voices will silence his roar!' That's what I heard from the green light — it tried to cover it up but I saw it! It's supposed to play them all at once!"

A vast moaning shook the floor then, and the ceiling shed bits of plaster. It was coming from the elevator banks. . . .

"We've frightened him with the sound — for just that one second!" the older Jorny said. "He's coming for us!" He handed the younger Jorny the boombox. "Play it as loud as possible in the temple! Go on! It'll make everything possible! We'll draw it off!"

He looked at the older Deede — and, to Deede's exquisite discomfort, the two adults kissed, kissed hugely and wetly. She looked away — so did Jorny. Then the older Jorny and Deede turned and ran past the elevator. The elevator doors opened and something red and green and endlessly hungry reached from it, stretching after them. . . .

"Oh no. . . ." Deede said.

"We'd better try this. ..." Jorny whispered. And they turned and pounded down the stairs.

In minutes they'd reached the upside down basement room, and dropped through the ceiling, coming up, spinning in space with momentary weightlessness, in the temple room...

Deede found herself on the floor, with the sphere-within-spheres, the Great Appetite, Yog-Sothoth looming over her, reaching for her, making its unspeakable offering . . .

And then Jorny reached to switch on the boombox, at full volume. . . .

"Jorny!" His hand hesitated over the boombox and he looked up to see his mother, trapped in one of the transparent tentacles, compressed and terrified. "Jorny — wait! I don't know what you're doing but it'll punish me if you do it! Stop!"

He drew his hand back. Deede knew she had to trigger the box — but she was afraid of what she'd see if she reached for it. This thing had the power to hurt, to punish, beyond time. It could reach into your soul. It was evil times evil. It was the dark side of pleasure and it was the green light of pain. It wasn't something to defy. . . .

But she remembered what the world looked like, after the Great Appetite was done. . . .

"I don't know what to do," Jorny said, covering his eyes with his hands.

Deede knew what to do. She reached for the box. .. .

"Deede — don't!" Jean's voice.

"Deede, wait!" Lenny's voice. "Look — we're here — you can't — "

Deede refused to look. In defiance, she stabbed her fingers down on the play button. . . .

The sound that came out of the box was the joined booming of a thousand songs at once, the sort that Jorny would choose — a thousand songs of angst, rebellion, uncertainty, insistence, fury. Everything but a certain kind of surrender. They all had one note in common: a sound that was a refusal to be anything untrue.

One great thousand-faceted roaring white noise, black noise, every noise of the sonic spectrum . . . roaring. Roaring refusal — roaring defiance!

And the sphere-of-spheres withdrew into itself, dropping everything it touched in the two worlds connected by the temple, retreating to other planes, where it could find surcease from the amplified, crystalized sound of refusal to surrender to its dominance.

The temple shuddered, and the spiral grooves seemed to spin for a moment, like an old fashioned record — and then the ceiling tumbled down . . . and smashed the boombox. Came tumbling toward Jorny —

Deede pulled Jorny aside, at the last split-second, and the great ceiling stones tumbled down in the center of the room, leaving a crust of chamber, the edges . . . and a pile of stone that blocked off the hole into the other Skytown, and rose in a cluttered knob into the basement room above. . . .

"You did it?" Jorny asked, coughing with dust.

"I had to. It couldn't have been worse for anyone. . . ." He nodded and they climbed, together, silently, through the dust cloud, and up into the basement room. They found their way to the stairways... where they found dozens of people, clothes soaked and skin wet with blood. They were weak — but most were alive, lying one to a step, up and up and up the stairs, feebly calling for help.

Among them, they found Lenny and Jean and Jorny's mother. They couldn't remember where they'd been. No one could quite remember it.

Not all of them were alive. Koenig was there —crushed almost flat.

The elevators were no longer blocked, the security guards were gone — except the ones that were dead. The front doors were wide open. When the ambulances came, no one could completely explain where they'd been or what had happened to them. Some internal disaster was inferred, and explanations were generated. Deede's father returned that night, summoned to deal with the emergency, and they moved out, to a hotel on the other side of town... the same one that Jorny and his mother were staying at. . . . He asked remarkably few questions.

Lenny and Jean spent most of the second day away from the Skymall in the hospital, getting transfusions, getting tested — they seemed dazed, slowly coming back to themselves.

It was just three days later that Deede set out for Portland, to visit her cousin. "Just need to get away from this town, Dad," she said. "Just for a few days. I want to go to mom's grave. . . ."

He simply nodded, and helped her pack — and he put her on a plane.

She had to go to the trail by the old quarry for three days before Johansen showed up. She'd let him see her go there, every night, but he'd been cautious. Still, since she was wearing as little as she could get away with, he couldn't resist.

And that night he followed her along the trail under the moonlight. . . .

She went to the precipice, where her mother had taken her fatal plunge. She waited there for Johansen, humming a song to herself. No particular song — bits of many songs, really.

Johansen came up behind her, chuckling to himself.

She turned to face him, feeling like she was made of steel. "No one's here — I'm sure you checked that out. And you can see I'm not wired. Not wearing enough to cover up a wire. You may as well say it. You killed her. You want to kill me."

"Sure," Johansen said. His hair was a jagged halo in the moonlight; his teeth seemed white in a face gone dark because the light was behind him. His eyes were two dark holes. "Why shouldn't I kill the little slut as well as Mama slut?"

"I don't think you can, though," she said calmly. "You know what? I used to be afraid of you. But I'm not now. I'm not afraid anymore! You're small time. I stopped what made you. I can stop you easily — you're so very small, in comparison, Johansen, to the Great Appetite itself."

"You're babbling, kid."

"Yeah? Then shut me up. If you can. I don't think you can, you limp-dicked jerk. You're nothing!" "

His face contorted at that, and he rushed her — and she moved easily aside, drawing the razor-sharp buck-knife she'd hidden in her belt, under her blouse in back. Then his ankle struck the fishing line she'd stretched, taut and down low between the roots, over the little peninsular jut of the cliff. And he stumbled and plunged, headlong, into the quarry, just as she'd known he would. She wouldn't need the back-up knife, after all, she decided, pleased, as she watched him fall wailing into the shallow water, to break on the jagged rocks she'd arranged down there.

He lay face down in the shallow water on the rough-edged stones, struggling, calling hoarsely for help, his neck broken, unable to lift his head but a few inches . . . finally sagging down into the water. Drowning.

Smiling, she watched him die.

Then she stretched, and waved cheerfully at the moon. She cut the fishing wire, put it in her pocket, tossed the knife into the quarry, and, humming a thousand songs, trotted back along the trail to the street. When she got to the sidewalk, she called first her Dad, then Jorny on her cell phone, said she'd be coming back soon.

And then she caught a bus to the cemetery to have a talk with Mom.

An interview with John Shirley appears on p. 26.

The Evil Sorceress

BY JENNIFER SAVAGE

The evil sorceress in her cliff-side castle was bored. She had received the heart of her foe on a gilded platter only yesterday, and there was no one left to tease the spells from her brain.

She sighed majestically as she roamed the echoing hallways. "I wish I had a real foe." She entered her elaborate bedroom, with its canopy bed and thick layer of bats sleeping peacefully on the ceiling. She flopped down onto her blood-filled waterbed, the curling tendrils on her tight black gown sprawled elegantly. "I'm so bored!" she moaned, stretching her curvaceous, evil body.

As if a spell had fluttered from her red lips, a handsome man in a loincloth floated through her window. The evil sorceress sat up in surprise, blinking as if caught in a dream.

"There is a foul stench in here, woman."

The evil sorceress, pleasantly stunned, nodded, her eyes on his muscled chest as she pointed skyward. "It's the bats. They give off ammonia."

"Be rid of them."

She raised a black brow. "Get rid of my pets?"

"Be rid of them!" he commanded.

"Oh, alright," she said, and with a wave of her hand the bats awoke, screaming and raining acrid droppings as they flew out the window. The evil sorceress was rewarded with an exquisite night of pleasure.

"Woman, fix me a meal," said the man the next day.

"Oh, all right," she said, and there appeared before him her prized eel stew which he ate ravenously while complaining, right down to the last succulent eel bone.

The pleasures that night were far less remarkable. And so the next day when he proclaimed, "Woman, fix me a bath," she replied, "It's time for you to go." With a wave of her hand she bid him leave. But there he stood.

Peeved, with a wave she sent him over a cliff, but there he stood. Angered, with a wave she flung him across the sea, but there he stood. Using both hands she tried to turn him into a pig, a frog, a worm — nothing.

She was still frantically waving her hands in the air when he said, "Now, as to my bath, I want a massage, don't forget the feet — I get corns there. I'll need my chest shaved, and don't forget to heat the towels, I hate cold towels . . ."

Be careful what you wish for ...